

Wake up.

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Wake up.

by [penink](#)

Summary

Dream comes back this time.

Divergence from the dead don't dream, chapter 22. Not considered canon to the story, just a very sad "what if?" If you are content with the ending of tddd, do not feel the need to read this! It is not a sequel, it is not essential, nor does it contribute to the closed story I have made.

If you just came for the angst and the bloodshed, go wild that's all this is <3

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

HERE WE ARE.

I just really like writing angst, and there were things I didn't get to do in the main fic, so, ta da! an AU for my AU!

Expect the same level of darkness of tddd, but 0 promise of catharsis or a happy ending. This fic is not canon to tddd. It's just me answering a little "wouldn't that be fucked up or what aha". This one won't be for everyone, remember, this IS a horror fic and does not have a minecraft gore filter, and while it's nothing beyond what has happened in canon, canon is also very dark.

This chapter specifically: paranoia, stalking, non-graphic beheadings, c!Dream being c!Dream and general creepiness.

Anyway, hope you enjoy! Or don't. Your call!

AN UPDATED NOTE:

This fic was started before recent allegations came out regarding cc!Dream. I am going to finish this work as it is a fictional character, but I do not support cc!Dream or his actions and would prefer those that do not read my works. The same now applies to cc!Wilbur.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tommy can't stay down here. Not because his friends are worried and waiting, nor because if he stays down here in the dark it will only prolong his misery, no— Tommy remembers something.

Tommy scans every corner, knowing even the one he has curled into isn't safe. Dream could be in the walls again. The longer he stares the more he becomes convinced of it. Stone walls don't mean anything. Dream could burrow in just as easily as if they were dirt. His home is messily constructed, there are too many half finished rooms and holes in the walls. Too many places someone could be watching him from. *He's in the walls. Why do you think you made it home, Tommy? Because he was waiting here. He's waiting for you to panic. It's more fun when you panic, remember?*

Tommy doesn't move. The room is silent except for his own breathing, growing faster and shakier by the second. He's breathing too loud. He can't tell if it's just him or if someone else is breathing just beyond the walls.

Tommy is tired of being right.

Tommy takes a deep breath, preparing to scream, but there's a hand over his mouth before he can. He cannot make a sound as he is dragged back into the walls. Tommy shuts his eyes as Dream keeps him pinned to the wall with an arm pressed to his throat. Tommy tries to pull it away, to get him to relent, but Tommy might as well be trying to break through stone for all the good it will do him.

"You're in *trouble*, Tommy," Dream speaks softly, voice lilting and teasing like a scolding older brother. Tommy opens his eyes, feeling a scream rise in his throat once more as that white mask stares back. He thinks he might faint. Dream shushes him. "Don't worry, I'm not gonna just drag you away. No— You're going to come home *willingly*. I know you will. You're gonna be just *begging* to come back."

Tommy's whimper comes out muffled. He wishes he could sink back into the wall, anything to get Dream's hands fucking *off* of him.

Dream continues. His anger is still so muted. He had been furious enough to border on a mental break mere hours ago, Tommy had *killed* him, and now he acts like nothing has changed. "And as a... show of good faith, I'm going to tell you something," Dream sounds so earnest, like this mercy is somehow genuine. "First off, if I let you go and you scream, when I get Wilbur I'll leave a *piece* of him behind," Dream shoves him back into the wall for emphasis, Tommy's head pounds from the impact. "But if you count to ten before you start begging for your little *protectors*, Wilbur goes home in one piece, got it?"

Goes home. You're going to come home. Tommy feels deep rooted disgust alongside his terror. Those vile words— Dream renders it an inevitability, he bastardizes the very notion of *home* in the basement of Tommy's only home left.

"Nod if you understand, Tommy."

Tommy nods.

"Good. Remember, if you scream while I can still hear you, Wilbur won't be getting out of this intact." Dream exhales a laugh as Tommy nods again, quiet and obedient. Tommy is still his good little lab rat when there's no one to protect him. "See you around, Tommy." Dream lets go without warning, so he collapses ground.

Tommy scrambles back to his feet, leaning against the wall to stay standing, turning around wildly, but Dream has already walled off his tunnel behind him. Tommy shoves himself back through to the main room of the basement, falling to the floor, scraping his arms against the rough rock. *Dream was there. He didn't hurt you. He didn't take you. That's bad, somehow that is very, very bad. He's going after Wilbur. You cannot scream. You're supposed to wait. You cannot wait.*

Tommy runs upstairs.

"T-Tubbo! Tubbo, we've got to go, we've got to go *now*," Tommy latches onto his best friend, holding onto his arm tightly. "H-He's— We've got to get to Wilbur— *Where's Wilbur?*"

"Tommy— Tommy, slow down, what're you talking about?" Tubbo looks startled.

“I don’t have– I don’t have *time* to explain– where is he?!”

“Community house, what’s–” Phil stares at him, alarmed.

“Dream is going after him– fuck, we’ve got to hurry–” Tommy’s hands are shaking. He stumbles towards the prime path. He can’t run. *He can’t run.* “Phil– Go! You’ve got to go *now*, you and Techno– we’ll catch up!” Tommy’s breathing becomes rattled and wheezing. Tommy flinches when Ranboo goes to offer him a hand. “Stop *staring at me* and just go!” Tommy finally shouts.

Phil and Techno exchange one more look before running ahead down the prime path.

“H-He’ll take the sewers, he’s gonna get there faster, we’ve got to– oh *fuck*,” Tommy’s voice breaks. He already knows he’s failed. He didn’t stand a chance.

By the time they catch up it’s all the more certain. It’s like the world has slowed, every struggling step Tommy takes downstairs feels like one more stone pressing down on his chest. Phil stands in the lower floor of the community house, holding a tattered brown jacket.

“Where-? Where is... where is he?” Tommy asks even as he knows the answer, stumbling forward, not looking around the room, his eyes remain locked on Phil.

Phil looks up at him, threefold grief so much colder than the first two times. The way he looks at Tommy, he’s mostly just sorry.

“Where is he?” Tommy asks again. He knows the answer but it’s all he can say. He feels Tubbo’s hand on his shoulder, he can feel his pity in that one act and still all he can do is ask. “Phil– Phil, where’s Wilbur?”

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“Where’s Tommy?” Wilbur gets his bearings on being alive and those are the first words out of his mouth. He hadn’t planned on coming back ever again.

“Slow down, there, Wilbur. Don’t worry, I’ll get your brother here soon enough,” Dream is so teasing. There’s no more anger there, just amusement. Somehow that’s worse.

“S-So you don’t have him?” Wilbur doesn’t know why Dream would be honest with him, but he has to ask.

“Not *yet*, but once he knows I have *you*, he’ll walk back into my forgiving arms,” Dream sighs wistfully.

Wilbur stares at him for a moment, horrified panic only growing worse. “Y-You don’t need Tommy, alright? You have me– you want to kill someone over and over, then just kill me. I- If you want– if you want information! I’ll tell you whatever I know. I won’t fight you. Please,” Wilbur should know it’s futile, but some part of him hopes if he makes himself pathetic enough, Dream’s interest will remain in him instead.

Dream laughs. “Oh, *Wilbur*,” he says his name like he’s a naive child. “You’re sweet, really, but no. You’re only fun when I can use you on Tommy.”

“When you... what?” Wilbur’s voice grows softer. *Use you on Tommy*. Dream says it like he’s literally crafting Wilbur into a tool in Tommy’s torture.

“You’re only fun when I have Tommy!” Dream repeats brightly. “See, you’re what I need to keep him in line. I mean, it’s fun training him, slowly picking him apart until he’s desperate for my approval, but that’s unsustainable, you know? But *you*, Wilbur,” Dream chuckles, looking down on him from behind that soulless smile. “You should’ve seen it– well, I guess you *will* see it once I get him back, but when I said I was gonna hurt *you*? All the fight drained out of him. It was like a switch flipped, you know? I bet once I bring him back, he’d do anything to keep you safe. I bet he’d cut his ear off if I asked, all I’d have to do was mention your name. *That’s* what I need. Not you... groveling and offering yourself up on a silver platter. That’s *boring*. If you’re so desperate for me to hurt you, just wait. Tommy will probably refuse once. He’s still got that *tiny* bit of Tommy spark left in him. Until I make him watch me break every bone in your body,” nothing in Dream’s tone indicates an exaggeration. Wilbur will be terrified by that later, right now all his fear is occupied with Tommy. “Sorry if I’m making you feel worthless, Wilbur, don’t worry, you have your use! You just only work... as a matched set.”

Wilbur feels sick. He knows on some level it’s futile. Nothing he can say or offer will stop Dream’s cruel obsession with Tommy, but he has to try. “They won’t look for me– the others, they won’t bother, they don’t want me. But if you take Tommy, you’ll never be able to stop running. You want your game to continue? T-Then you’ve got to keep far away from those people, right? With me, it’ll be like it was before they knew Tommy was alive! No one goes looking for a dead man, right? I didn’t even get a grave, man. No one is gonna bother looking for me, you’ll be free to do whatever you want, right?”

A pause, Wilbur waiting for Dream’s reply so he can keep pleading, Dream just watching him, seemingly lost in thought. “You know what, Wilbur. I can’t say you’re totally boring,” Dream crouches down so he’s at his eye level. “Actually, you’re kind of endearing,” Dream taps him on the nose. The only reason Wilbur doesn’t try to bite him is because he still wants to try and bargain. Once he knows he’s lost– he already has lost, but denial is better than helplessness– then he’ll find a way to gnaw Dream’s leg off. “You begging for Tommy’s life... it’s cute. Your *protective big brother act*,” he says it like it’s a joke. “It’s funny, but Tommy’s got you beat. He’s been a very good sacrificial lamb since the very beginning. Do you remember that? Back in the day, he was already trying to find a way to die by my hand. If anything, this whole exile thing we’ve had going on lately, we’re just going back to our roots. I mean...” Another laugh, smug and cruel. He knows what his words will do. “Why’re you fighting it now? You were happy to let me kill him back then. You were his superior officer, weren’t you? And you let him walk into a duel you knew he would lose.” Dream almost doesn’t sound mocking anymore, instead genuine in the worst way. Twisting the knife into everything Wilbur hates about himself is just another game to him. “Tsk tsk. You never were a good leader, though, were you? All talk. Which I’ll admit is pretty handy for getting people to die for you. You should probably stick with what you’re good at, though. You know... watching from the sidelines while he stands there waiting for me to shoot him.”

Dream stands, knowing he's won. Wilbur has no fight left to give. They both know it to be true. Every word of it. Wilbur has never been able to save Tommy before. He should know he has no hope to do so now. And soon, he won't just be a useless bystander, instead he'll be instrumental in Tommy letting himself be broken.

"You wait there, Wilbur," Dream teases like Wilbur isn't chained up on the floor. "I know you want to be the big brother, but you should get some rest. I'll be the one to bring Tommy back home."

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"Tommy, can you... can you explain what exactly happened? How did you know this was going to happen?" Techno asks carefully.

"Dream- H-He grabbed me," Tommy's hand goes to his throat, where Dream had kept him pinned to the wall. He falls back against the spiral stairs, sliding to the floor, staring, as if transfixed, at Wilbur's old coat still hanging loose and empty in Phil's hands. "S-Said he was gonna go after Wil."

"Tommy- He- *What?*" Tubbo still keeps a steady hand on Tommy's shoulder, joining him on the ground. "Why didn't- Why'd he-"

"Why didn't he take me?" Tommy says numbly. "He didn't need to. He's got Wil- Oh *fuck-*" Tommy's horror overshadows the hollow feeling in his chest. "H-He- He's got Wil." Tommy grabs a fistful of Tubbo's shirt, pulling him closer. "He's got Wil, Tubbo! H-He can't- He can't have him, Tubbo, this is *bad*, this is so fucking bad-"

"It's- It's gonna be okay, Tommy. They're looking for him, okay? Everyone is looking for him," Tubbo tries to console him.

A hysterical laugh bubbles up around Tommy's trembling breathing. "You h-have- You have no fucking idea what he could do to him until then, do you? He-" Tommy's voice drops to a frantic whisper as he pulls Tubbo closer, "he's gonna *ruin* him, Tubbo." Tommy's words, pressed so carefully to Tubbo's ear, send chills down his spine. "He's gonna- He's gonna break him until-" Tommy takes another shaky breath. Tommy can't bring himself to say it. He cannot tell them all *until I go back to him*, because his first thought is they'll have no choice but to lock him up somewhere to stop him from doing that. The thought that his friends would never do that to him doesn't even cross his mind. "Until he's as damaged as me," is what Tommy says instead. Finally, he lets go of Tubbo, instead rocking slightly, tugging on fistfuls of his own hair.

Tubbo looks to the rest of them helplessly. He doesn't know what to do. Ranboo steps up and offers Tommy a hand.

"We should... we should go. Get you something to eat, y'know?" Ranboo says uncertainly.

Tommy doesn't even look at him. "All of you should stay away from me. He'll hurt you."

“Sorry, Tommy, you’re not gonna get rid of me that easily,” Tubbo says. “Please, bossman, I promise you we’re going to find him, okay? We won’t stop until we do.”

Tommy glances up at him, and maybe for a moment there’s something like trust between them. Tommy nods, finally accepting Ranboo’s offered hand.

“You have to find him, Tubbo,” it’s all Tommy can say.

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For days there is nothing.

Tommy settles into Snowchester. He doesn’t sleep well and there is no solace to be brought in checking in on a corpse. He knows exactly where his brother lies now, and it is not a tomb he can rest peacefully in. Tommy waits for Dream’s ultimatum, for Tubbo to tell him of some sign they’d discovered, for anything.

Still, there is nothing.

Tommy complies when he’s asked to do things. He eats when told to, goes where he’s asked. Everyone is still trying to keep him safe. Do they not realize it doesn’t *matter* anymore? If Dream wanted him, he would’ve taken him away that day. Tommy is no longer scared for himself. He’s scared for Wilbur, and no amount of guards or stasis chambers or isolation can protect him now.

Tommy sleeps alone now. He’d had the sickening thought that if Dream wanted to take him, dragging Tommy from the bed beside Tubbo would surely wake Tubbo. Dream would slit Tubbo’s throat, and proceed on his merry way. At least this way, there’s a chance Tubbo will sleep through his best friend’s abduction and survive the encounter.

The nightmares only get worse.

He wakes in the cabin in Snowchester, the room still dark, the corners blurring into shadow and the windows so black it’s like they don’t even have glass. The fire is completely out. The fire is never completely out. Tommy knows something is watching him, hunting him. The outline of a man steps out of the darkness, and it is not Tubbo standing over him. That white mask almost glows, that smile mocking him with every step closer he takes. Tommy cannot move. It’s like he’s taken a knife to the back and is now paralyzed. He cannot scream for help. Not that he would. Dream has no interest in Tubbo. Best to keep it that way. Dream does not speak. Tommy cannot hear his footsteps, nor any indication of his movements. He’s like a ghost. Dream finally moves beyond stepping forward. He drops something on Tommy’s bed. His brother’s head, and his head alone, falls onto his lap—

He wakes. Tommy bolts upright, quickly covering his mouth so his panicked whines don’t wake Tubbo across the room. He’s awake now.

He’s awake. He knows he is. The darkness isn’t as deep and there are still embers burning in the fire.

...So why does he still feel like he's being watched?

Tommy can feel it. That prickling on the back of his neck, that instinct telling him to run or hide or beg for mercy. Tommy feels a cold breeze enter the house. Tommy can also feel his heart beating in his throat, he clutches fistfuls of the blankets as he slowly, carefully turns around.

The front door is ajar.

Just a smidge, just a crack, through it Tommy can see moonlight, snowflakes drifting down still, nothing more, but the fact of the matter is the door is open. Tommy wants to dismiss it. He wants it to have been the wind or maybe even a mob, but the door has a latch. Someone had to have opened it. And whoever it was could still be here. Tommy doesn't want to move. He wants to hide under the blankets like the child he had once been and wait for the monster to stop *looking* at him. Tommy slowly puts his bare feet on the hardwood floor, the cold grounding him. Tommy does not get a weapon or wake Tubbo, he takes one slow, deliberate step towards the door. Nothing happens. No one moves or tries to grab him. He takes another. He's getting closer to the door now and some dark part of him, a part too logical to ignore, tells him the moment he reaches for the handle something else on the other side will grab him instead. He has to shut and lock the door. He has to do it right now because if he doesn't something is going to fight to get in—

Tommy runs the rest of the way, throwing himself at the door, it snapping shut violently, the latch clicking back into place. Tommy keeps pressed against the door, resting his forehead against it, eyes shut tightly as he waits, as he waits for someone to try to open it, for there to be a laugh right outside at his panic, or even for someone hidden inside to finally reveal themselves. Nothing happens. The night stays silent save for his soft, frantic breathing.

“Tommy?” A soft, unsure voice speaks up from across the room.

Tommy yelps, turning around and pressing himself into the door, cowering. Tubbo is sat up in bed, hair a wild mess, staring at him with weary concern.

“You okay? Nightmare?” Tubbo starts to get up.

“I-I'm fine, Tubbo. Just go back to bed,” Tommy says quickly.

Tubbo frowns. “Do you want to stay with me tonight? I don't mind, really.”

“Nah, you kick too much,” Tommy lies with a feeble attempt at a smile.

“You sure you're okay? Did you hear something?” Tubbo reaches for his axe, not believing Tommy's attempts at calm for a second.

“I think it was— Just the wind got me all spooked. I'm better now,” Tommy says. “Just want to try and go back to sleep.”

Tubbo stares at him, like he's trying to read something more from him. “If you're sure. Just wake me up if you need something, alright, bossman?”

Tommy nods. "Thanks, Tubbo."

Tommy returns to his bed, laying on his side, eyes locked on the door which remains properly shut. He doesn't sleep.

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It's harder to notice the absence of something Tommy hadn't had in a long time to begin with. But he begins to look out for it. The days when Ghostbur disappears. He's gone more often than not. Tommy knows what that means. He tries to explain it to them, but they don't understand. They can't, not really. At first Tubbo doesn't want Tommy to go anywhere alone, even as Tommy insistently explains that it doesn't matter.

If Dream wanted him he would've taken him by now. They just don't *understand*. Then again, Tommy hasn't really explained it. He knows better now that they won't chain him up the moment he says Dream wants him to come back willingly, but he's still not really inclined to tell them considering many implications. He's just going to try to outlast him. Until his friends can catch the bastard.

So far no dice.

Tommy still stays close. Tubbo prefers it that way. Tubbo gets him to at least walk along the icy shore and get some fresh air. Tommy doesn't mind it so much, the open space of it all, when he isn't alone.

"Try to skip it," Tubbo hands him a flat stone, grabbing one for himself. "D'you remember when we used to do this, back in the pond in L'Manberg?"

"Yeah," Tommy snorts. "It was too fuckin' tiny sometimes we threw the rocks to the other side."

The waves of the ocean don't reach inside the bay, it's too closed off and the ice just spread enough to keep it still. Perfect for skipping stones.

Tubbo glances down at his comm, his focus immediately shifting, the rock hitting the shore instead. "Fuck—"

"What?" Tommy stops immediately as well, staring at him in dreaded horror.

"Someone spotted him. Over by L'Manberg," Tubbo heads back towards the house at a quick pace, grabbing his axe.

"T-Tubbo—" Tommy doesn't know what to say. This could be it. They could grab him. They could get Wilbur back. In a few hours, Tommy might be on the other side of a cell from Dream, begging for his brother's life.

"It's gonna be okay— I'm gonna go help but you should stay here, okay?" Tubbo puts a hand on his shoulder.

"N-No what if he—" Tommy's voice breaks, he grabs Tubbo's hand, squeezing it tight.

“He’s by L’Manberg, we have a sighting, he’s not here. You’ll be safest at the house, okay? I don’t want you anywhere near him. I don’t want him to even see you,” Tubbo says firmly. “You’ve got the stasis chambers in the basement, right?”

“O-Okay,” Tommy feels words get caught in his throat. *Please don’t leave me.* He doesn’t voice them aloud.

“I’ll– I’ll be back soon, Tommy. I promise.” And with that, Tubbo takes off at a run over the hill toward L’Manberg.

Tommy’s heart is racing again, his legs feel weak and shaky. Tommy stumbles toward the house. He just has to get inside. He gets inside, he’s safe. He’ll hide downstairs, by the stasis chambers, he’ll be able to get help. Tommy almost collapses against the front door, fumbling with the latch, his terror growing every second he spends out in the open. Finally, it yields and Tommy almost falls into the house.

He doesn’t fall.

Because someone catches him.

“Hey– Hey, don’t scream,” Dream warns, voice too soft and calm, one arm keeping Tommy’s arms pinned to his sides, his other hand covering Tommy’s mouth. “Wouldn’t want Tubbo to come running back here so I’d have to kill him, now would we?” Dream tuts him.

Tommy doesn’t struggle. He thinks he might faint.

“Good. Good, you remember how to behave,” Dream sounds so *approving*. “I’m gonna let go now, okay?”

Tommy nods. Dream lets go. Dream hadn’t shoved him but Tommy falls forward anyway, hitting the ground and scrambling to put some distance between him and Dream. Dream blocks the only exit.

“Hey, hey, don’t panic,” Dream raises his hands placatingly. “If I wanted to take you by now, Tommy, I would’ve just snapped your neck while I was holding you. We have... a little game going on still, don’t we?” Dream must be smirking behind that mask. Tommy can fucking hear it.

“H-How are you– You can’t be here, you’re s-supposed to be–”

“What? In *L’Manberg*?” He says its name mockingly. “I work... in mysterious ways, Tommy,” that same smug intonation that makes Tommy’s skin crawl. “Before you keep blubbering and begging or whatever it is you do– I’ve got a present for you.”

Tommy remembers his nightmare.

“*Whoa*,” Dream laughs. “You look... terrified.” Dream is ever so amused. “I thought you *liked* when I brought you presents, Tommy. Remember? I’d bring you food and new clothes and... *flowers*.” Dream says that word like they share an inside joke, clearly appreciating

when Tommy shudders. “Here,” Dream pulls something from his pocket. Tommy ducks down and covers his head as he throws whatever it is at him.

It doesn’t hit him. It doesn’t even make a sound when it hits the ground. Tommy looks through his fingers which he’d covered his eyes with. It’s just a lock of hair, tied together with a bit of string. It’s just hair, so why does Tommy feel bile rising in the back of his throat?

“What do you *say*, Tommy, when someone brings you a gift?” Dream tilts back on his heels goodnaturedly.

Tommy just keeps staring. It’s not just curly brown hair. Part of it has the streak of white.

“*Tommy*. I asked you a *question*,” Dream leans down, scolding him. “What do you say when someone brings you a *gift*?”

Tommy keeps staring at the floor. At the *piece* of Wilbur Dream had dropped at his feet like a cat bringing a dead bird. “Thank you,” he says hoarsely.

“Better,” Dream reaches out like he’s going to ruffle Tommy’s hair, but Tommy jolts away like he’s been shocked, scrambling back until he hits the wall. Dream laughs. “I won’t keep you much longer. I’m sure your babysitter is anxious to get back, but thought I’d remind you of your... *situation*,” Dream meanders around Tubbo’s home, grabbing one of his mugs. It has a bee painted on its handle.

“Don’t–” Tommy doesn’t know how he gets the courage to speak. Then Dream looks at him and he wilts.

Dream sets the mug back down, hands in his pockets, almost lazy, like this is the least interesting part of his day. “Either we continue on like this, and I start bringing you little pieces of Wilbur when I visit, or you’re going to come back home with me.” Dream pauses, waiting for his reply.

Tommy says nothing, just keeps his eyes locked on the floor and thinks about the knife Tubbo keeps under his pillow. Tommy could reach it from here, but he knows what happens when he tries to pull a knife on Dream.

Dream continues when Tommy maintains his silence. “Look at you. Bet you’re hoping Tubbo will come home and *save* you right now,” Dream says with patronizing pity. “You’ve told them. About our... friendship. Haven’t you?”

Tommy just keeps his dead eyed stare locked on the floor.

“You can tell them, you know. Tell them all of it. It’ll be more exciting paying you visits when you’re locked away in some ivory tower. Or– If we’re being honest, they’re not gonna believe you, will they?” Dream sighs.

Tommy’s nails dig into his palms so hard it hurts.

“But the lock of hair, right? That’s *evidence*. Or it’s old. And what happened to poor Wilbur? Maybe Callahan never even brought the body to the community house, right? Think about it, no one has *seen* me since you killed me. Who knows. Maybe you’re *making it all up* because you’re so fucked up in the head now, right?” Dream waits for a response. If he’s disappointed by Tommy’s mutism, he doesn’t push. “Still. No rush, to tell them or to get back to me. I’m starting just with his hair, see? No harm in that! But it’ll only get worse from there. So, I suggest you cave quickly. I’ll... see you around.”

Dream leaves, Tommy still doesn’t look up, but he hears him walk away, netherite boots thudding against the wooden floors, the door creaking as it shuts, the latch clicking.

Tommy remains still and silent for another moment before he scrambles for the kitchen sink, vomiting into the drain.

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

CW: mutilation, claustrophobia, paranoia, dehumanization, god complexes, c!Dream being c!Dream. I can't think of any other specific warnings, but it's fucked up, okay? You know how it is.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tommy doesn't tell Tubbo. Dream's encouragement that he *should* tell them all made him all the more inclined to keep this to himself. He wars over it incessantly, though. *Your friends would never lock you up. Not even to keep you safe, they wouldn't do that to you.*

There's no point in telling them. Even if they keep you safe from Dream, it won't matter until they find him. He still has Wilbur.

Wouldn't it be nice just to tell someone? To have someone confirm you're not crazy, that this is happening?

Why does Tubbo deserve one more thing to worry about? He can't do anything to help you now can he?

Dream doesn't show. It's been days since his last visit, and Tommy has yet to wake up to the door open in the middle of the night, but it's *other* things. Tommy knows he had Eret's sunglasses when he returned home, the next day they were gone. He *swore* he put them beside the door, in his coat pocket, but they weren't there.

It's nothing. You lost them. You lose shit all the time.

Tommy keeps Dream's journal close, tucking it underneath his mattress, when it's not in his inventory or when he's not reading it to the point of near obsession. He needs something, anything, any indication of where Dream has gone. He doesn't find anything there except reminders of what could be happening to Wilbur right now.

Sam is kind enough to replace the missing shades with a pair of goggles. That's much harder to lose, he can wear them around his neck. Tommy still finds ways to make himself unsettled. He'll wake up to them placed neatly on the kitchen table, when the night before he can't remember having taken them off.

"Tubbo, did you move these?" Tommy stares down at the table, fumbling for a memory he knows he doesn't have.

"What?"

“The goggles. I thought I...” Tommy frowns. There’s no point in this, no point in obsessing when it doesn’t get him any closer to Wilbur. “Has anyone seen Dream? Since... since the last time?”

Tubbo looks apologetic. “No, Tommy. I’m sorry. Everyone is out looking, but you know, it’s a big server.”

“Yeah, it is,” Tommy is so tired of this. It’s been days, that should feel like nothing, but he knows even alive, time must be crawling by for Wilbur. He has been burying the thought every time it worms its way to the surface, but maybe the notion that Dream has been following him, watching him from the shadows, could be a comfort. Every minute he spends following Tommy is one less minute spent torturing Wilbur.

Tommy still hates going outside. The back of his neck prickles and he spends more time scanning the horizon for a white mask than he does focusing on whatever task Ranboo is attempting to distract him with. They get him outside long enough to visit the apiary. It doesn’t exactly go well, Tommy more frantic about how he showed weakness when he stumbled outside, freaking out over the mere memory of rot. Ranboo and Tubbo both cave easily when Tommy asks to stay in, even if Tubbo clearly disapproves of the way Tommy clings to that vile journal.

This time, Tommy doesn’t write his own thoughts down. He can’t with that constant nagging feeling that someone is watching, that someone could be reading it even right over his shoulder. Fuck, he’s a paranoid wreck. Still, his thoughts remain his own, albeit addled and unhealthy. Once or twice he tried writing things down, but he’d burned it afterwards, just as he had with the book he’d filled out in his cell all those weeks ago.

The nightmares only get worse. Wilbur, begging him for help, Wilbur, accusing him of abandoning him, Wilbur, alone and trapped and scared, Wilbur begging Dream for mercy and compassion, a horrible reflection of himself from so much time where Dream was all he had to cling to. When he wakes, there is nothing for him to take comfort in, even if in another life that only solace had been a corpse. It’s hard to fall back asleep either way. So he paces the house, adept at moving silently now, at making himself smaller. He checks the door and makes sure it is bolted shut, he checks each window for the same. He looks into the basement, where each stasis chamber remains ready to go, he checks the attic, which Tubbo had offered him as his own room and which Tommy had refused. He felt too trapped up there. Only after searching the cabin, silent and careful from top to bottom, does he settle back into his bed, which he has pushed into the corner, shuttering all the windows around it, only now does he open Dream’s journal. His eyes are accustomed to the dark, and he can just make out the words from the dim light of the moon and the embers of the fire.

The book remains useless and cruel.

Maybe Tommy can convince himself that Dream won’t do any of these things to Wilbur—why would he? He’s already done these experiments on Tommy— but that isn’t exactly reassuring, as it means whatever he actually is doing to Wilbur is utterly unknowable to him. Dream had valued Tommy’s ability to function. To walk on his own, to see, to speak; things that made Dream’s experiments less work Tommy was allowed to keep. Dream had been cautious with permanent damage, however strange that may seem coming from Tommy who

was down a finger, but Tommy knows Dream could have been *so* much worse. He can only pray that same luxury extended to Wilbur.

He said he's going to bring you pieces of him. Maybe he's not starting small. Maybe he's waiting so long so he can bring you Wilbur's fucking leg wrapped up in a bow.

~

“Oh, Wilbur! I’m home!” Dream returns to the room Wilbur is locked in in far too good a mood. Wilbur doesn’t move from his spot leaning against the wall, he doesn’t even bother to look at the man. If he’s not going to bargain for Tommy’s freedom, Dream isn’t even worth his gaze.

“Nothing to say?” Dream feigns a pout. “You must be getting bored in here. Or I guess you’re used to being bored from Limbo, huh?” No reply. “Now, I’m thinking, normally I didn’t have to keep Tommy tied up. He wasn’t trying to kill me or whatever your game is, so I’m thinking, if you play your cards right, I’ll untie you. Maybe even move you into a better room,” Dream crouches down to look Wilbur in the eye, even as Wilbur has resolutely ignored him since he’s walked in. “Come *on*, Wilbur. That’s a pretty good deal. Tommy isn’t even here, so if you were trying to put on a brave face, acting like you *hate* me, for his sake, you don’t need to do that anymore. And if you play along here, well, let’s just say I might feel less inclined to go seek out Tommy for company, hm?”

Wilbur finally looks up at him with narrowed eyes. “What, you want me to play along? Pretend to be your *friend*?” He sneers.

Dream laughs. “No, I think we’re something a little more... *profound* than friends.”

“Aw, I didn’t know you felt that way about me, Dream. Maybe I’d give you a chance if you weren’t a pathetic slimeball of a man,” Wilbur says scornfully. Okay, maybe he *will* talk to Dream. He’d had to lay off the insults when Tommy was hanging in the balance, but right now the sick green bastard is fair game.

“Yeah, that’s real cute, Wilbur,” Dream says dryly, unamused. He sits on the floor across from him, musing. “I was thinking more like... an unwilling seraph. Or maybe a martyr. I won’t say *follower*. That implies a little too much choice. Hm. Sacrificial lamb is something, you know? You’re here to bring the rest of the flock home and I am your shepherd,” he gestures grandly to the dank stone brick walls encasing them. “Still, not quite.”

Wilbur stares at him, mouth hanging open slightly, as his bitter irritation is traded for disgusted horror. “You’re... you’re not a god, Dream.”

Dream laughs, low and threatening. “Oh *Wilbur*, that’s blasphemy,” he says it like he’s scolding a child. “You should be more careful.”

Wilbur doesn’t bother trying to mask his disgust, but he cannot think of any other insult to spit back to that, all he can think is *was he like this with Tommy? All the time— was he like this?*

A horrifying thought, all the worse that he knows it's true.

Wilbur would do anything to keep this man from Tommy. If he could convince him to be set free, just enough that he can try to kill the bastard, that's all he needs. If he engages, Dream will consider untying him.

"Fine. My input— not that you care— seraph sounds like sanctimonious bullshit, and martyr is too... noble," Wilbur says with a huff. "And I wouldn't think I'd need to explain the flaws of *sacrificial lamb*, but considering everything about you— well," Wilbur gives him a scathing look. "You're a lost cause on that front."

"Oh, I thought you might like martyr, Wilbur," Dream says smugly.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Wilbur narrows his eyes.

"You've already done the whole martyr thing, haven't you?" Dream watches him, he wants a reaction, he wants Wilbur angry. "You were pretty good at it too, huh?"

"I'd argue I was pretty shit at it, actually. I think martyrs tend to stay gone," Wilbur's snark sours, no longer willing to engage with Dream's little games.

"Hm," Dream seems to be assessing him. "I saw your brother today, you know. I told him what I was gonna do to you if he didn't come with me. And, not sure if you've noticed, he chose to stay there."

Wilbur scoffs. "If you're trying to make me feel all hurt and abandoned, try harder. Tommy isn't stupid enough to fall for whatever bullshit story you're giving him. He goes with you, that doesn't change fuck all for me, now does it? What, are you gonna *let me go*?" Wilbur mocks. "Yeah, didn't think so."

"Well, no," Dream considers it for a moment. "But the sooner he comes back, the more likely you are to keep all of your limbs."

"I'm supposed to be dead, Dream. What do I need legs for?" Wilbur remains haughty and undaunted. Some logical part of him knows he should be afraid, but Limbo puts things in perspective. Having a living body feels like a privilege, not a right. So whatever losses he suffers— nothing he'd expected to have anyway.

"...you know limb loss carries over, don't you?" Dream watches him for a reaction. "Tommy, when he lost his finger, he didn't have it in Limbo. You know, I almost forgot to ask him about that stuff, y'know? I was so fucking angry at that stupid kid, too busy making him pay for disobeying me. That was when he tried to talk to an Enderman, you know. Do you want to know what I did to him?"

There it is. The surefire way to strike a chord with Wilbur. Always Tommy. Wilbur can do whatever he can to not show it, but it doesn't matter. Dream knows exactly what he's doing. He gets the satisfaction of wounding him whether he reacts or not.

"No, no I fucking don't," Wilbur snaps.

“Okay, fine. I’ll keep it to myself then,” Dream actually relents, and Wilbur is no less disturbed. Dream is still smug, only now it’s down to Wilbur’s imagination to figure out how Dream had hurt Tommy for asking for help.

Wilbur wants to know and he doesn’t want to know, worse still if he were to hear it from *Dream* of all people.

Wilbur needs to kill this man. He cannot let him get to Tommy again.

“Well, anyway,” Dream stands, pulling a knife from his belt. “I’m afraid I’m not just here on a social call.”

Wilbur wants to tell him *I’m not scared of a fucking knife you prick*, but staring at it in the hands of a man who has snapped his neck without hesitation, knowing he has no hope of defending himself, any defiance dies in his throat.

Dream twirls the blade between his fingers as he looks Wilbur over, not a man, not even a lab rat or a prisoner, but simply meat to be butchered. “I’ll make it quick. I’ve got a deal to uphold.”

~

“Hey, Tommy,” Wilbur sits at Tubbo’s kitchen table, looking tired. The cabin remains dark, Wilbur cast in shadow. They’re alone. Tubbo isn’t home. “Sorry to intrude like this, but, well, I’ve been getting a little impatient,” he sighs.

“I can’t,” Tommy knows what Wilbur is hoping for. “There’s— There’s got to be another way, okay? We’re gonna catch him, Wil.”

“Oh really? Then why haven’t you tried anything to stop him? You’re the only one that’s talked to him lately, other than me of course. Dream shows up, he scares you, but you don’t do anything with that, do you? You don’t try to fight him, or prepare or shout for help, you just cower while he tells you what’s what. I am getting tired, man,” Wilbur laughs. “What’s taking you so long? Either you fight back, or you should’ve given up by now.”

“People are— People are looking. They’re gonna catch him, alright? And then we’ll get you back, okay?” Tommy stays across the room, almost scared to get any closer.

“Right. That’s going to work, hm? By then— what do you think will be left of me, huh, Tommy? Maybe if you wait long enough, Dream will give you all the pieces and you can try to rebuild me from scratch! How about that?” Wilbur snaps.

Tommy doesn’t say a word. What can he say to that, knowing it’s an all too real possibility?

Wilbur sighs. “Could you show me to the door, Tommy? I expect Dream will be wanting me back.”

“...What?” Tommy doesn’t understand. He doesn’t know why Wilbur isn’t looking at him, why he merely extends a hand and waits for Tommy to come to him.

"I mean, I can try and find the door on my own, but it would be easier if you just give me a hand," Wilbur gestures for him to come closer.

Tommy hesitates, stepping forward and taking Wilbur's hand. Wilbur stands.

"Well, go on, lead the way," Wilbur says irritably. "What are you waiting for? Tommy?"

"...Wilbur, your eyes."

"Yeah. Where'd he leave them?" Wilbur asks, but other than that he doesn't react.

"Tommy?" He sighs. "Look, I know you're scared, your breathing is getting all shaky like it always does, but you knew this would happen. He said he was going to bring you a piece of me, and is it really a stretch that he brought you two instead?"

"W-Wilbur," Tommy's voice shakes. He thinks he might be sick. "How are you— How are you so fucking calm about this?!"

Wilbur squeezes Tommy's hand so tightly it almost hurts. "I'm not calm, Tommy. I'm resigned. I know this is your fault, so I'm just waiting until you make the right choice and stop being selfish for once in your fucking life," he sounds like he did in Pogtopia. But normally this kind of bitterness had been against Manberg or himself, not Tommy. "And until then, walk me back. I'm sure Dream is getting impatient."

Tommy can do nothing but hold Wilbur's hand and walk him to the door.

The outside is not the tundra.

It's a narrow tunnel of earth— no, no that's not it. It just stops, about six feet in. It's a grave. Wilbur walks ahead with confidence, still holding Tommy's hand.

"Well, come on then," Wilbur huffs. "Are you still holding out, or are you coming with me?" Tommy says nothing. Wilbur pulls him. "You said you'd follow me anywhere, Tommy. Why stop now?"

Tommy stares at empty sockets. He steps forward.

Tubbo's front door slams shut. There is nothing but darkness. Tommy lets go of Wilbur's hand, turning around, fumbling for the door handle, but there's nothing, just more earth.

"W-Wil? I can't get out— how do I get out?" Tommy claws at the earth, it feels like it presses in tighter. "Wil?!" Tommy turns around, reaching forward into the blackness. His hands just touch earth. "WIL! WIL WHERE ARE YOU?!" Tommy refuses to believe it, to think that Wilbur left him here, he refuses even as he claws at the earth, even as the tightly packed dirt crumbles, even as instead loose soil pours in, until he can't move, he can't see, he can't breathe—

Tommy wakes with a start, gasping for breath, writhing against blankets tangled around him. Tommy gets free and still he cannot breathe, he falls to the floor and pushes back, covering his mouth. He needs to stay quiet, he knows this, noise means attention and attention means pain, but he can't fucking breathe—

Tommy stumbles toward the front door, holding onto the latch with an iron grip. *You open it, you know what you'll see—*

No. No, I am going to see snow. I am going to see the outside, because it can't be, it isn't real—

Tommy throws open the door and scrambles onto Tubbo's porch before he can think about it any more. The cold air burns his lungs, but finally he can breathe. Tommy leans against the stone wall lining the porch, clinging to it for balance, staring out at the ice over the water, letting that image remain burned into his mind, anything but that utter blackness.

Wil could be experiencing that right now. It was a nightmare and you woke up. That doesn't make it any less real. He could be blind. He could be buried alive. Dream could be doing anything to him right now and it's your fault your fault your fault—

Tommy can't scream. Dream is good at what he does. The first thing he does is cover Tommy's mouth, then he starts dragging him toward the treeline. All thought of Wilbur leaves his mind, because it's clear Dream has gotten impatient. Days of silence, and now Dream is going to take him away. Tommy kicks viciously, trying to get his arms free, but Dream keeps them pinned to his chest with one arm; why is he so *weak*? Tommy's eyes stay locked on Tubbo's cabin. It's still in sight, he can still scream for help, if he can just get Dream to *let go*.

Tommy tries to pull his head back, but Dream just follows. So instead, Tommy opens his mouth and bites down on the side of Dream's palm.

"Fuck—" Dream curses under his breath, but he only pulls away for a moment, before Tommy can scream, he instead holds him so his jaw is pinned shut.

Tommy's bare feet continue to drag in the snow as he struggles for purchase. Tubbo's cabin is growing more and more distant, soon it will be out of sight and out of range of his screams. Tommy's vision begins to blur with panicked tears. The cabin disappears behind the treeline, and still Dream does not let go. *The past month has been nice, hasn't it. Maybe you should start focusing on the stars, on the way the world smells, on fresh air. You're never going to have it again—*

Dream stops.

He lets go of Tommy and shakes out his hand, irritated even if Tommy hadn't had the chance to draw blood. Before Tommy can get his bearings on the fact that he can *move* again, Dream let go of him, he could start running— Dream backhands him across the face hard enough to send him tumbling into the snow with a gasp.

"Don't you ever fucking bite me! Do you hear me?! Don't you ever fucking do that," Dream snarls, towering over him.

Tommy scrambles back until he hits a tree, covering his head, waiting for the next blow, his pajamas are already damp with snow, so he makes no effort to get off the ground.

“Fucking hell– I get enough of that from your brother,” Dream grumbles.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry– please–” Tommy doesn’t know why Dream stopped. He’s on the ground now, what happens next is usually Dream breaks a rib.

“Just– Just shut up, will you?!” Dream snaps. “Fucking hell, I forgot how annoying you are.”

Tommy forces himself to hold his silence. Dream is a good meter away from him. Tommy could try to run, so why the fuck isn’t he?

“Okay, are you done freaking out?” Dream sighs. “Calm down, will you? I just needed to get you far enough out that your dearest *Tubbo* wouldn’t interrupt. Not that I mind killing him, but he’s actually been a pretty useful pawn lately. Wouldn’t want to take him off the board so early.”

“U-Useful?” Tommy croaks out.

Dream’s irritation wanes as he stares at Tommy. It’s like Tommy can sense that stupid smirk behind his mask. “You always think *Tubbo* is on your side, don’t you?”

Tommy doesn’t say a word. His dread only rises, an odd paranoid hurt rising up against his bidding.

“Come on, Tommy,” Dream says pityingly. “Think about it. You must have caught on by now. *Really?*”

Tommy says nothing.

Dream scoffs, “I swear you weren’t this quiet before. Still– Think about it. You must’ve caught on by now. They’re just *waiting* for me to take you, Tommy.”

“No,” Tommy speaks before he can stop himself.

“*Oh,*” Dream laughs. “Defensive, are we? Go on, then. You’ve already started talking back, so might as well keep going. What do *you* know that I don’t?”

Tommy’s stomach churns. He struggles to stand. His feet are so cold they burn. Sure, Tommy hadn’t planned on getting dragged off into the woods, but he still wishes he’d put on shoes. Tommy doesn’t try to run. He doesn’t even look away from that taunting white mask. “W-We’re gonna kill you,” a whimpering laugh tears itself from trembling lips. He waits for it to hurt.

Dream pauses only for a moment. He doesn’t sound angry. “Right, right,” Dream nods. “That’s why your friends have done nothing to catch me, right? That’s why *Tubbo* leaves you all alone, so I can make my little visits? Don’t you think it’s *odd* that I’m still able to get to you? You’d think they’d try a little harder if they care so much. I mean, they saw how bad I hurt you– But maybe they agree, y’know? They *know* you fucking deserved it,” he hisses, finally rage bleeding through. Dream shakes himself. “Think about it,” he forces his voice to calm. “Have you actually *seen* anyone looking for me?”

“I know they told me—”

“They *told* you,” Dream cuts in, confident and patronizing. “That doesn’t mean anything. Not sure if you’ve noticed, but I’ve had no trouble getting here. I’ve seen you, Tommy. I’ve looked you right in the eye while you trail after Ranboo and Tubbo. I’ve seen the looks they share, where they’re just hoping you’ll stumble and fall with that stupid fucking cane of yours so I can get to you.”

“S-Shut up—”

“You can argue all you want, Tommy. Doesn’t make me any less right,” Dream has the audacity to sound like he pities him. “You should do them a favor, leave now. I’ll even let you go back and write a note or something to say goodbye.”

Tommy wishes he could project the loathing in his gaze into a weapon, to tear Dream apart. “The only way I’m going with you is if you fucking drag me out of here.”

“Hm,” Dream seems to mull this over. “No. No, I think I’ll wait until you come to me. I mean, *I* can wait. Who knows if Wilbur can.” Dream watches for a reaction, satisfied by Tommy’s anger turning to dread. “Ohhh, I’ve struck a chord, haven’t I? Want to know what I’ve been doing to him?”

“No, no I fucking don’t!” Tommy’s voice breaks.

“Aw, I thought you cared!” Dream feigns a pout. “Don’t you want to know how he is? If I’ve been feeding him, putting fresh water in his bowl.”

“You’re fucking sick, Dream. You’re a monster,” spitting insults is the only power Tommy has right now. This courage has to count for something, but no matter how hard it was for him to even do this, it does nothing to actually protect Wilbur or stop Dream.

“Yeah, I’ve heard that one before,” Dream scoffs. “Hey- remember when I’d give you a say in what I did? Wilbur is too stubborn to chat lately, but what do you think he’d prefer- drowning or getting his throat slit?”

Tommy swallows thickly, heart beating just a little faster. He could end this right now. He’d just have to leave freedom behind and go with Dream willingly. “Why are you doing this?!” Tommy bursts out. “If you want me, just take me! What’s the fucking point of it all?!”

“*Because*, Tommy,” Dream doesn’t seem to get annoyed or tired of repeating himself. Tommy’s desperate attempts at defiance are entertainment enough. “I want you to come home willingly. Your choice in all this, your... participation, is very important to me.”

Tommy sputters wordlessly, any sharp retort or defense he might have made is buried under his disgust.

“Anyway, we had an arrangement, didn’t we?” Dream moves on as Tommy refuses to keep playing along with the exchange. He begins to search his inventory. “Do you want me to

take something to Wilbur? We could make this fun. I'll bring you something from Wilbur, and I'll take him something from you! Like the flowers from Tubbo, see?"

Tommy doesn't respond. He just watches Dream's hand, his nightmare glaringly fresh in his mind.

"Here," Dream extends a hand. Two drops of blood fall into the snow. "Go on, take it."

Tommy stares. To him, it's just a bloodied clump of gore in Dream's palm. He's not going to fucking *touch* it. He also hates the pang of relief he feels when it's not an eye.

"It's sort of fallen apart. I've been waiting for you to finally be alone, so, it's been a few days. It's part of his ear, see?" Dream holds it up so Tommy can see the mangled cartilage. Tommy shuts his eyes and takes a shaky breath, bile rising in the back of his throat. Dream continues, "aw, you don't want it? I thought you missed Wilbur!"

"Stop it, please just stop it..." Tommy whispers, almost inaudible.

"Honestly, this is calmer than I expected you to be, but like I said, I started small. Just part of his ear, not even the whole thing! Just a bit off the top," Dream says cheerfully. "Fine, I'll just leave it here, I guess. If you don't want it, I bet there's a wolf out there who will," he drops it into the snow, shaking his hand so that flecks of blood spatter across the ground.

Tommy keeps himself pressed to the tree, staring at anything except Dream and the piece of his brother.

"I'm guessing that wasn't enough to make you come back with me, huh?" Dream asks.

Tommy shakes his head.

"Alright, fair enough," Dream concedes easily, this exchange nothing more than a round of a game. Dream is playing the long game. He can be patient when need be, as long as he's having fun. "That's all I need from you tonight. Do you want me to walk you back? There might be mobs out and about. The place isn't very well lit, y'know?" Dream offers, ever so chivalrous.

Tommy wants to respond with anger, to spit on his meager and cruel attempts at courtesy, like they're in any way *friends*. All he can manage is to shake his head again.

"Alright, fine. I mean, if you die on the walk back, nothing I can't fix, right? I'll... I'll see you around, Tommy. I mean, you won't see *me*, but... I'll see you around," and with that, Dream disappears into the woods.

Tommy is alone in the cold, Wilbur's blood looks black against the snow.

If you've actually managed to read this— thank you! I'm sure it wasn't easy lol. Any thoughts, screaming, general anguish, is welcome <3

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

cw: dead insects, stalking, paranoia, general horror and a sense of dread, ya know.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tommy makes it back to the house. He's shaking, and his feet have gone from burning to numb. He left... Dream's *gift* for the wolves. Tommy is too tired to worry about hypothermia.

"Tommy?"

Tommy jumps, hitting the wall behind him, one hand pressed to his racing heart. He didn't even scream.

Tubbo stares at him with sleepy concern. "Where'd you go, bossman?"

"G-Got claustrophobic. Stepped outside, that's all," Tommy lies. Tommy isn't just trying to save Tubbo from worrying or lying because Dream was so supportive of him telling Tubbo, there's more to it than that. If there ever comes a point where he breaks, where he goes with Dream, this way it'll be easier to lie to Tubbo. He doesn't know what he'd do. Maybe he'd try to hurt Tubbo before he leaves, so Tubbo won't have to miss him. Tommy doesn't realize this, but that sort of plan, the finality of that potential goodbye, he'd be doing exactly what Wilbur had done, just before the 16th.

"You're shivering like crazy," Tubbo starts to get up.

"Yeah, it's cold. Don't get up, I'm good. I'll... I'll change into something warmer. I really just want to go to bed," Tommy says quickly.

"You sure?"

"Yeah, yeah don't worry about me," Tommy waves him off, forcing a shaky smile.

Tubbo frowns, and it's clear he doesn't believe him. "Okay. You'll get me if you need me, though, yeah?"

"Yeah, yeah, fine, quit fussing. You're so clingy," Tommy rolls his eyes.

Tubbo gives him a look, more amused than irritated. "Then I am going back to bed," he flops back onto his pillow wearily.

Tommy doesn't sleep. He has no idea what he's meant to do, and Wilbur can't afford his indecisiveness.

He spends the following days in a haze. He goes where he's told, he reads that awful book, he debates what his own freedom is worth. He's not as good at hiding it as he might hope.

"Let's go to L'Manberg again! Just... just to go on a walk. Have you seen Ranboo's house yet?" Tubbo is trying not to be pushy, but it's hard not to be when Tommy rarely leaves the house. "Or we could talk to Phil, or see if Quackity is around. Or just walk. We don't have to talk to anyone, but I think going outside would be good for you, man."

Tommy stares down at Dream's book bitterly. He still has no idea what he's supposed to do. He still hasn't told Tubbo. He isn't planning to. "...fine. Fine, let's go to L'Manberg."

Tubbo is saying something about Quackity as president. Something about how little the government actually has to do when there isn't someone actively trying to invade or destroy them. Instead he's been helpful in planning patrols to look for Dream.

"...And I'm actually surprised how many people are just volunteering to help. Like, Sapnap surprised me at first, but now it sort of makes sense, doesn't it? But there's also Puffy really putting in some effort, and Eret too, did you know Eret has knights? So them, Puffy, HBomb, even Punz is helping out. And I don't even think anyone is paying Punz, unless maybe Eret pays them for being knights? I dunno how rich Eret could still be, people steal from them all the time and— Tommy?"

"Huh?" Tommy blinks, looking over at him in mild surprise.

"You okay?" Tubbo asks.

"Yeah, yeah, sorry, zoned out there," Tommy shakes his head. He'd been too busy scanning the surrounding area, for a white mask sure, but also for particles, a disturbance on the ground, Dream could be moving around the server with an invis potion easily.

"Sorry. I probably shouldn't be talking about this stuff," Tubbo says.

"No, no you're fine, just... distracted," Tommy doesn't admit what he's been fixating on. It is not worth repeating, an older haunting; the cruel fact that Dream could be hurting Wilbur right now. That at present, the only option that seems open to him is a sacrifice. Him or Wilbur.

It was never going to be Wilbur.

Tommy hasn't given up, not quite yet, but this dread is sinking its teeth in deeper. He'll figure something out. They'll catch Dream. Everyone is looking for him. It's only a matter of time, surely.

Surely.

Tubbo looks like he wants to keep questioning him, but he doesn't. Tommy is grateful. Tubbo instead walks ahead into New L'Manberg.

“Hey, I’m gonna check on the bees, okay? I’ll only be a minute and you can wait outside. Ranboo will stay with you,” Tubbo waves over the former minutes man with a smile.

“Hey guys,” Ranboo greets them. “What’re we doing today?”

“I dunno yet. One sec, I’ll be out in a minute,” Tubbo opens the outer door to the apiary.

“You doing okay there, Tommy?” Ranboo looks down at him, earnest as he is worried.

“Wot?” Tommy blinks, turning from the horizon.

“Sorry, you just look a little out of it,” Ranboo almost seems embarrassed.

“Yeah. Not like I don’t have good reason to be,” Tommy mutters bitterly.

“Yeah, okay, fair enough—”

“What the fuck?!” Tubbo’s shout is muffled through the wood.

“Tubbo?!” Ranboo goes for his axe, shoving his way into the apiary, Tommy in tow, whatever anxieties he has about the bees washed away by fear for Tubbo.

Tubbo stands among the flowers, unharmed. Scattered around the room are the corpses of every bee in the apiary. They’re insects, it is not a bloody crime scene, but there are just *so many*. Every single one is dead on the ground, like they stopped mid flight and collapsed.

“Tubbo, we should go outside,” Ranboo says quietly.

“What?” Tubbo is staring, miserably captivated. He looks back to his two friends, his eyes shining as he holds back tears. It’s the youngest he’s looked to Tommy in a long time.

“Whatever killed them could still be here. Poison or…” Ranboo remains calm, even as the rest of that sentence hangs unspoken in the air, *or Dream*.

“Right– Right,” Tubbo wipes his eyes quickly, heading for the door, Tommy jumping back outside quickly before he gets run over. Tubbo paces, arms folded over his chest, staring down at the grass. Tommy knows him better. He’s looking down so he and Ranboo won’t see him cry.

“I am so sorry, Tubbo,” it’s all Tommy can think to say.

“Who the fuck would do something like this?!” Tubbo shouts to the empty sky. He stops his pacing, a hand pressed to his forehead. “I know, I know, I’m just– Fuck.”

“I dunno why he– I’m so fucking sorry, man,” Tommy can’t seem to stop.

“You’re… sure it was Dream?” Ranboo asks doubtfully.

“Well, let’s think for a minute, shall we?” Tommy says sarcastically. “You two show me something you made, something important to you, and a few days later it turns up fucking

destroyed. That's— That's textbook."

"Right..." Ranboo mutters.

"He's been... you think he's been following you?" Now Tubbo is distracted from his pains, that single moment of acting his age is replaced by something colder. He has people to protect.

"Yeah," Tommy says reluctantly. He doesn't have a good answer for this one. "What else is he doing?"

"Well, I assumed," Tubbo glances to Ranboo, they share a look. "I assumed he's hiding somewhere continuing his experiments with... with Wilbur."

"Oh," Tommy feels like he should be angry. Like Tubbo thinking Dream is off torturing Wilbur isn't a thought that's haunted him, like Tubbo thinking that means he isn't doing everything he can to find Dream. The fact of the matter is knowing doesn't save anyone. "Guess that makes sense."

"Well, why do you think he's following you, Tommy?" Tubbo eyes him carefully, not suspicious, merely concerned.

"Because he'd never let me go. He'd keep an eye on me," Tommy says. A dark thought rises, one he knows to be true and feels sick for it. "In his journal, that creepy fucking book, he said... he said something like once something you have is taken or gone, it's gone forever. Which means—" Tommy stops with a shaky inhale. "I-It means he—"

"He thinks he still has you," Ranboo supplies quietly.

"Yeah, that," Tommy thinks back on the night before. Dream hadn't been worried in the slightest. He'd been surprised, maybe inconvenienced, by Tommy resisting him, but not at all concerned. Like he was still in complete control. Complete power. *Like he still owns you.* Tommy shivers.

Tommy can't sleep. He rarely can sleep anymore, but it still irritates him. He's so fucking tired and weak. Ponk told him he needs to rest, to eat regularly, and do physical therapy for his fucked up leg. Tommy has managed one of those things from Tubbo all but enforcing meal times for the three of them, Ranboo participating gladly, Tommy less so. Tommy must sleep some, he drifts, he thinks, but he sleeps so lightly now. The slightest sound sends him back to awareness with a jolt of terror.

Like it does now.

Nothing goes bump in the night, there is no bang on the door or a whisper from the dark, what makes Tommy stir is a quiet, dull thud. Tommy sits up, squinting into the dark, panic drowning out drowsiness in an instant. He almost regrets refusing Tubbo's offer of a knife to keep under his pillow as he's left clutching fistfulls of the blankets instead of a weapon. No figures emerge from the dark, nothing else stirs. So what woke him?

Tommy continues to frantically scan the room, but nothing changes, the silence presses on save for his panicked breathing. Tommy sees a shadow on the floor. He almost jumps before recognizing it. Tommy's dread is swept away by relief, the kind of relief that makes him realize how scared he had been. It's not Dream. It's Dream's journal. Tommy carefully keeps it tucked underneath his mattress, and it had fallen on the floor from his restless tossing and turning. That's fine, that's logical.

So why is Tommy scared to reach down and pick it up?

He stares at it, transfixed. The seconds feel like hours, and still Tommy doesn't move, he knows time is passing because he still blinks, but other than that, he remains locked on the journal, willing himself to reach down at take it as every instinct tells him that would be a mistake. *He's waiting. This is what he does, he waits.*

That doesn't make sense. He doesn't want Tubbo to know, if he grabbed you now you'd scream and wake up Tubbo. It doesn't make sense.

Unless he's stopped playing that part of the game. Maybe he wants to kill Tubbo.

Tommy acts while he is distracted by his own thoughts so he can't stop himself, snatching up the book from the floor, and waiting with held breath, staring down as if still expecting something to emerge. Nothing happens. Tommy relaxes a modicum. The book had fallen open, some of the pages folded from it. Tommy flattens them back out. Not out of respect for the book, but simply needing something to do, some change to make him feel in control. Tommy absentmindedly flips through the pages, knowing he's not likely to fall back asleep after that moment of adrenaline. There are always more horrors to peruse, he supposes. It's slow going. Tommy inching through it paragraph by paragraph, stopping every time a sentence unsettles him. So, often.

The second half of the journal is blank. Tommy resents those blank pages. Those pages are for a future he prays he'll never come to see. Tommy flips back from the white to the ink.

It smears.

Tommy stops. He doesn't move, he doesn't breathe. Something breaks. Not in the room, but within Tommy. Cold horror like ice in his veins, the surface of his skin covered in pins and needles like he's trying to escape himself.

The ink is still wet.

He's still here.

Tommy is too scared to even move his eyes from the black smudge blotting the page and now staining his hand. But he still searches, he listens for any sound, for breathing other than his own. He waits for that prickling feeling on the back of his neck to become more acute. Nothing happens.

Dream wouldn't have had time to make it up the ladder. There are no corners to hide behind in an open room. A logical conclusion turns his fear to cold dread. Tommy looks over the

edge of the bed.

He's still here.

He has to look, he doesn't want to, but how can he not look? What is he meant to do, stay here frozen until morning? Tommy doesn't know if he's gotten braver or if his sanity died with him back in Dream's vault, but he leans forward. He doesn't have a weapon. He doesn't have *anything*. Just this stupid fucking journal. Which he now can't help but raise like leather and paper can be a weapon. Tommy swings underneath and chucks the book forward into the dark.

It hits the wall, and tumbles uselessly to the floor, and Tommy is left staring at the empty space underneath his bed, his heart beating so hard he can feel it in his throat.

"Oh *fuck*—" Tommy only has time to hoarsely speak those two words before he leans too far and falls off the bed with a much louder thud. "Fuck!"

"Tommy?" Now Tubbo wakes, sitting up sharply, hand fumbling in the dark for his axe.

"I'm okay," Tommy says. He's had worse than a few bruises. Tommy stares at the journal, innocuous and innocent and sinister on the floor. "A-Actully I'm not okay," Tommy grabs it, stumbling to his feet. "I'm not— I'm kind of freaking the fuck out, Tubbo."

"What? Why?" Tubbo swings his legs over the side of the bed, axe in hand.

Tommy stops, clutching the book tightly, trying not to think about how the book had been in Dream's hands mere minutes ago. "Please don't be mad at me."

Tubbo's tension softens into something gentler. "Tommy, I can't like, promise I won't be mad, but I'm not gonna hurt you, okay?" He sets aside his axe, knowing Tommy's eyes are following it as he does.

"O-Okay," Tommy is still staring at the axe, but his eyes almost look glassy, like he's not really seeing it. "I... I saw Dream. He... he spoke to me."

"What?" Tubbo scrambles to his feet, grabbing his axe again. "Where? When?"

Tommy steps back. "A few times, really," he laughs, voice high and panicked. His lip trembles and his voice falls to a whisper. "I-I think he was in the house tonight."

Tubbo visibly pales. "What?"

"H-He wrote in the journal. He did, I'm sure of it," Tommy says softly.

Tubbo is, for a moment, stunned into silence. Tommy had lied to him. He'd allowed Dream to follow that close without telling his best friend. Tubbo is almost angry, but mostly he's just scared, a horrible breach of privacy and safety in his own home from that monster sneaking around without reproach. Tubbo doesn't know what to do with horror from hindsight. He snaps out of it. "Fuck— He could be here with invis, goddamnit, Tommy— Drink this the moment I drop this bottle," Tubbo shoves a bottle of milk into his hands as he

rummages in another chest, returning with several splash potions of poison. “If he’s still fucking here, he’s got to reveal himself or get hurt, ready?” Tubbo scans the cabin. Tommy nods and Tubbo throws the potions at every wall before downing his own milk.

Tommy still flinches at the sound of the bottles breaking, but the milk staves off the poison so he only felt the initial sting. The air burns his nose and his eyes, but no one is revealed. They’re alone. Tommy feels maybe a tiny bit safer.

“Okay... okay good, that’s something,” Tubbo is mostly talking to himself as he watches the room. “That’s step one– Tommy, what exactly did he put in the journal? Tell me everything he told you.”

Tommy nods. “He wants me to go back with him, Tubbo. He said–” Tommy stops, swallowing thickly. “He said he wants me to go back willingly. Said the longer I wait the more he’s gonna hurt Wil.”

Tubbo doesn’t actually seem surprised, rather a grim, weary acceptance. “Of course he did– He’s not gonna have you, Tommy. And he’s– He’s not stepping foot in my *fucking house* ever again.”

“And we get Wilbur,” Tommy says imploringly.

Tubbo nods firmly. “And we get Wilbur.” He says it with such conviction, Tubbo almost believes himself.

Chapter End Notes

That scene was in part inspired by this [awesome art!](#)

This chapter is shorter than my typical chapter, but this fic I'm mostly just doing what I want, posting scenes as I see fit, so, this is all I have to give! I'm having fun writing horror, I hope you're having a little fun reading it! Or I hope you're horrified, whatever works!

Thank you for reading and as always feedback is cherished <3

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

CW: Threats, stalking, general creepiness and horror, referenced violence. Just. You know. The usual.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Wilbur wakes up to shouting. He's still not used to waking up to *anything*, really, so he jumps, looking around frantically for the source of the noise. The room is pitch black still, of course, the cell door still shut and locked. Wilbur's feeble efforts at cooperation meant that he was still bound and stuck in the dark, damp cell. Wilbur shivers. He's not used to warmth, sure, but the air is properly cold. The stone brick walls are slimy, moss growing between the cracks and water dripping down and pooling on the floor.

Muffled through the wall, Dream's angry tone is just audible. "*When I tell you to get me out, you get me out!*" The rest is too quiet to make out.

Then, silence.

Wilbur flinches when the stone wall slides out of place, squinting in the dim light of what looks like blue lanterns.

"Wilbur," Dream says, flushed and irritated, but not with Wilbur. He seems to take a moment to force himself to calm. "How's your ear?"

Wilbur glowers at him. "Is this what you do, is it? You hurt people and then you show up to fuss over them?"

Dream enters the cell, leaning against the wall with his arms folded over his chest moodily. "I didn't *want* to hurt you. And I healed you after. Tommy decided how the deal went, and I had to follow through, y'know? I only took *part* of it."

"Part of it..." Wilbur scoffs. It doesn't hurt so much anymore, but the blood that had poured from the wound had dried, sticking uncomfortably to his skin. The health pot had stopped the bleeding immediately, but his ear still stings. "You say that now, but isn't the plan to take more of me? What's next, then?"

"So *eager*," Dream says teasingly, a threat behind every word. "No. Not today. It hasn't been long enough. I need Tommy to have time to... think over his options."

"Fine by me," Wilbur says sarcastically. Easier than acknowledging the relief he feels.

Dream tilts his head, assessing him. “You know, Wilbur. You’ve got a smart mouth on you, but you’re not gonna actually be able to *hurt* me, now, are you?”

Wilbur says nothing, watching him carefully, keeping the threats and insults he wants to snarl close to his chest. His job right now is to lie in wait, and when he has the chance, kill Dream. Dream doesn’t continue, he steps forward and pulls the knife from his belt. Wilbur leans away until he’s pressed to the wall. He wants to cover his ears. He stares at the blade coming closer, breath quickening to panic.

Dream grabs his arm, dragging him to the ground so Wilbur gets a face full of slimy water. He tastes salt. Wilbur struggles viciously against his hold, unable to look back and see what Dream is doing and fucking hell the unknown is *terrifying*. Dream has no trouble keeping him pinned to the ground. He still has the fucking knife.

Then the tension lets up. Literally. Wilbur’s arms are in agony as they spring apart for the first time in days, the rope falling to the ground. Dream stands and steps back.

Your hands are free. This is the part where you strangle the fucker.

Wilbur can’t stop shaking. He struggles to even sit up off the ground, his arms begging for mercy as they finally move again, his tattered and bloody clothes now soaked. He returns to his spot pressed against the wall, staring up at Dream with poorly muted fear, like a rabbit that had been caught, tagged, and released. He doesn’t try to stand. He doesn’t try to fight back. He doesn’t try to do anything.

“Aren’t you gonna thank me?” Dream says, cool and patronizing like he’s oblivious of the havoc he so easily wreaks. He knows what he did. He could’ve just told Wilbur he was going to cut him loose and have him turn around. He wanted Wilbur scared. He wanted Wilbur to think he was going to take another piece out of him. He got what he wanted. Wilbur has no biting retort to give. He stays quiet. So Dream pushes a little further. “I said, *aren’t you gonna thank me*, Wilbur?” He leans forward so he’s at Wilbur’s eye level. He still has the knife.

Even terrified, yet again Wilbur can only think of Tommy. He knows Tommy broke. He doesn’t blame him for it. But Wilbur wants Dream to fucking lose, and if keeping his silence is the only way he can do that, so be it. He cannot bring himself to speak, to attempt a harsh insult, but he refuses to play into Dream’s little game. That counts for something.

Dream sighs. He doesn’t hit him. “It’s okay, Wilbur. Really. Tommy didn’t have manners when I started with him either.” He stands, stepping back. “But don’t worry. You know how it goes, negative reinforcement, sure, but positive reinforcement too. For Tommy it was the pleasure of my company and I brought him food.”

“You have nothing to fucking offer me,” Wilbur says bitterly. He’d prefer Dream cut him up than hear more about his fucked up little Tommy training manual.

“I can tell you’re still moody, you’re not up for talking. What’s the saying? Carrot, stick? Well, how about this, the stick is a put you back in limbo for a few more years. I don’t need

you alive to cut off pieces of you. And the carrot..." Dream rummages through his pockets. Wilbur watches him with intent caution. "Give me your hand, Wilbur. Just reach it out."

Wilbur stares at him. He doesn't move. He's not going to offer himself up so Dream can chop his fucking hand off.

"It's not gonna *hurt*, Wilbur," Dream teases. "Trust me, it'll be better if you do reach out."

Wilbur still doesn't move.

Dream shrugs. "Fine." Dream drops several things on the ground in front of him, they land in the filthy water. First, a bottle of water shatters, glass spreading across the floor, and the clean water immediately joining the rest of the tainted pool. The second, a piece of bread. It's already soaking up the water and growing soggy by the second.

The last item is of the most interest for Wilbur, and maybe it shouldn't be, but it's still what Wilbur picks up first. It's a cigarette. A currently damp cigarette, but a cigarette nonetheless. Wilbur doesn't say anything, just stares at it. He knows what this is. It's Dream mocking him. The way Dream views the world— Wilbur wouldn't be surprised if he view attachments under the same category as addictions.

"I told you it wouldn't hurt. You should've listened," Dream says scoldingly. "I'm not worried. You'll catch on. I mean, think about it, Wilbur. Between you and Tommy, who was more stubborn?" Dream waits for a reply that isn't coming. He continues. "And Tommy learned to behave. So for you, it's just a matter of time."

"You gave me a fucking useless cigarette," Wilbur finally speaks, sharp and irritated. "I can't light it— *this* is a reward? And for fucking what? Not trying to strangle you?"

"Oh, I'm aware it's useless, Wilbur. It's not a reward yet," Dream doesn't get annoyed, merely lectures with that same cool, domineering tone. "But if you behave, maybe you'll earn a light. Do you understand now?"

Wilbur scoffs, but he keeps the cigarette in his fist. "Why don't you just get the fuck out?"

"Okay, if you're sure. I mean, I could bring you food and water to replace what you wasted, but I can leave too," Dream is still taunting him. If Wilbur wants to eat, he'd have to extend an invitation to Dream, to show him some manner of courtesy. Or Wilbur can stay here in the dark and the damp until he's thirsty enough to try drinking the water on fucking the ground. It's saltwater, Wilbur fleetingly wonders if they're near the ocean, but it's not like it would matter to him either way. Wilbur doesn't respond. He's not too thirsty now and while he knows he'll regret it later, he refuses to give Dream the satisfaction.

"I'll see you in a few days. You clearly need some time to think. Come on, Wilbur, it's an easy choice. I send you back to Limbo, or you get some food, a smoke, and out of this shithole."

Wilbur says nothing, staring down at the glass glittering faintly in the water. He'll have to find a different corner to curl up in. He has to admit, he wished he'd put a hand out. He'd

just wasted clean water and food. He can't even be content in frustrating Dream, as Dream seems utterly at ease. Dream knew this would happen and he knows eventually Wilbur will break. Wilbur doesn't even know why he's fighting. This doesn't help anyone, not even himself.

See, that's why Tommy broke. You get it now, don't you? Dream gave him a choice and Tommy chose the one that was the most bearable. He didn't get to keep being brave or headstrong, but at least it didn't hurt so much. What's the point in fighting back when you know you're not getting out?

Wilbur keeps staring at the glass on the ground as Dream leaves him. Until the cell door slides shut and he's in darkness once more.

~

"Why the fuck didn't you tell me sooner?!" Tubbo is trying to bottle his anger, but he's about to start tearing his hair out. Tommy knew Dream was that close, and he didn't do *anything*. Putting not only Tubbo and everyone else at risk, but running the far more possible risk of letting himself get taken. Tubbo wants to scream, as all of his efforts to protect Tommy feel obsolete because of Tommy himself. Doesn't Tommy *realize* that if he'd told him they could've set up a trap?! Dream could've been behind bars by now if Tommy weren't— Well, if Tommy weren't so fucking *scared*. Tubbo can't really be angry with him. He's been conditioned to be this way. It's hard either way.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry I didn't— I wasn't—" Tommy is breathing faster now, stumbling back until he hits a wall. "I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry—" He stammers out, sliding to the ground and covering his head. "P-Please don't I'm really really sorry—"

"Tommy, Tommy it's okay! It's okay, he's not here, he's not here," Tubbo panickedly tries to reassure him, stepping forward. "Fuck, I wasn't trying to— I'm sorry, Tommy, that wasn't fair—"

"G-Give me a minute— I just need— I just need a fucking minute," Tommy raises a hand to stop him from coming closer.

"Okay, okay, Tommy. I'm— I'm sorry," Tubbo quickly steps back, shifting restlessly. He wants to help. He knows he can't. So he checks the door, he checks the windows. His door isn't that secure. Tubbo had always known that, but even if it had been secure, he's relatively confident nothing short of a sealed bunker would stop Dream if he *really* wanted to get in. Tubbo's insurance was the axe he kept beside his bed, not a sheet of wood between him and the cold. He'd imagine anyone with a knife could lift the latch on the door from the outside, but he doesn't think they could *lock* it again from the outside. The door is still locked. Tubbo just doesn't understand it. The windows were all latched too. Just to be safe, Tubbo also tosses a harming potion into the attic and another into the basement. Still, nothing.

Tommy has at least pulled himself together enough to think, knees tucked into his chest, rocking slightly. Out of the corner of his eye, he can see where he'd dropped the journal. He grabs it, flipping furiously to the most recent entry.

“No progress. But he still flinches in his sleep and the pawn still has his axe beside his bed. Like he’d stand a chance if I wanted to kill him. Tommy didn’t keep the ear. Not too surprising. He still hasn’t told the others about my visits. I’d know. They wouldn’t be staying in this pathetic little cabin in the middle of nowhere, unguarded, secluded. Did they really think isolating was the smart thing to do? Idiots. Makes my job easier though.

I think he knows I’m here. There’s no way he can hear me and if he did he’d have woken up by now. It’s something else. He knows I’m here because we’re”

The next word is smudged beyond legibility. Tommy stares at the page, shellshocked. He can’t bring himself to move. This is new. This was written *tonight*. These weren’t pages slipped into the book, no, Dream would’ve had to take the journal with him and return it without either of them noticing, or— Tommy rereads the words with horrible comprehension— or *sat there and written in the book while he and Tubbo slept.*

“T-Tubbo!” Tommy shouts. “*Tubbo, please!*” Tommy is hysterical, screaming like he’s in physical pain.

Tubbo rushes back to his side, kneeling beside him, axe still in hand. “What? What?!”

“I don’t— I c-can’t— Oh *god*,” Tommy chokes back a sob. He can’t breathe. “He was— He—” A wheezing, desperate inhale. “I think I’m dying I can’t— Help me, *please please* help me. This is *so* bad— this is— this is so fucking bad—” Tommy grabs onto Tubbo’s shirt. “I c-can’t breathe—”

“Tommy, Tommy you’re okay, you’re safe, Tommy, can you try and breathe with me?” Tubbo gently pulls Tommy’s hands away, trying to get him to relax his fists, but Tommy just holds on tighter, nails digging into his palms, only not drawing blood because he’s still clinging to Tubbo’s shirt.

Tommy doesn’t calm down. His hyperventilating soon overshadowed his speech and instead there’s just this awful mixture of sobs and wheezing gasps for air.

“Please, Tommy, please you’ve got to try, you’re gonna pass out—” Tubbo tries to get Tommy to copy his breathing, taking slow and steady deep breaths, but he almost thinks Tommy can’t even hear him now, heart beating so hard Tubbo can feel it in Tommy’s wrists. Tubbo sighs, an ache like an open wound in his chest. Tubbo lets go of Tommy’s fists and puts an arm around him. “It’s gonna be alright, bossman. We’ll just... We’ll just wait it out together.” Tubbo can’t bear the sound of Tommy struggling to breathe, but he has no idea what else to do. “I’m so sorry, Tommy. I’m so sorry,” he says softly, not looking at him, watching the rest of the cabin, waiting for the shadows to move.

Tommy stops, whether from usual exhaustion or maybe he got so breathless he actually did pass out, but eventually he stills, still laying against Tubbo’s shoulder. Tubbo stares at the journal, open on the ground. He could reach it. That vile, monstrous thing. He doesn’t want to read it. So he doesn’t. When Tommy is better, he’ll ask him about what Dream said. Then he’ll organize a regular guard. Whatever it takes. He won’t obsess over the morbidity, he’ll plan ahead. Like always.

Once Tommy comes back to himself, neither of them sleep. Tommy settles in at the kitchen table, Tubbo putting a blanket around his shoulders before rummaging for cocoa. Tommy just stares at the table, at the book closed in front of him. Tubbo places a mug in front of him before taking the chair beside him, following his gaze to that book.

“If you're not ready to talk, that's okay. And if you want to look at the book...” Tubbo holds back his anger. “We'll do it together, alright?”

Tommy laughs, a soft huff, but a laugh nonetheless. “When'd you get like this, Tubs?”

“Like what?”

“Like a fuckin' mother,” Tommy teases. A pause, Tommy holding the mug until the warmth sinks into his hands, soothing his palms and aching knuckles from how tense he had been. “Thanks, man.”

“You're my best friend, it's what we do, right?” Tubbo says. It almost feels like a lie. *It's what we do.* It's what Tubbo is *going* to do. He's not leaving Tommy again.

Tommy manages a smile. It falters as he returns to their current task. “What do you want to know?”

“Whatever you can tell me. Not just because, but so we can make a plan. We're going to figure this out, Tommy,” Tubbo sounds so sure. Tommy almost believes him.

“Dream brought me a piece of Wilbur the other day,” Tommy says before he can stop himself. It's not helpful, it's hardly even relevant, but that fact had been eating away at him. He needed to share it before it suffocated him.

“He—” Tubbo lets those words run through his mind a few more times, like if he thinks about it long enough it'll make sense as something other than exactly what it is. “Oh god...”

Tommy knows what he wants to ask. “I dunno why I didn't tell you. Not properly, but... part of it was Dream *wanted* me to tell you. He liked... He liked the idea of a challenge,” Tommy is focusing so hard on just keeping his breathing level.

“What exactly— *how*? When the fuck did he even *get* to you?” Tubbo is baffled.

“S-So the first time, he came out of the walls, you knew that bit. The next time...” Tommy pauses. He feels sick. There had been a brief lull where Tommy had actually felt safe at Tubbo's house. Dream shattered it immediately. “Do you remember when you said someone spotted him over by L'Manberg?”

“...yeah?” Tubbo says warily.

“He... he wasn't by L'Manberg. Dunno how he did it, but... he was here,” Tommy glances frantically around the cabin. “In the house. He brought me...” Tommy reaches into his pocket. Maybe it's fucked up, but he'd kept the lock of Wilbur's hair with him.

Tubbo actually looks relieved for a moment. “Oh. A *piece* of Wilbur. Sorry, I know still it’s bad, but I thought—”

“This was just the first time, Tubbo,” Tommy clutches the hair in his fist. “Next time h-he... he brought me something different.”

“Oh.” Tubbo has no way to express his horror beyond that. He doesn’t want to know the specifics.

“I left it... I left it out in the woods— he— he dragged me into the woods,” Tommy’s hands are balled tightly into fists again, nails digging into his palms. “I t-thought he was gonna take me. He was dragging me away from the house and I tried to scream— I fuckin’ *tried* but I couldn’t but then he *stopped* and—” Tommy stops with an unsteady inhale. “He didn’t take me because he has Wilbur.” His eyes return to the book.

“What the fuck, Tommy— This is,” Tubbo can’t find the words. His skin still crawls at the thought of Dream lurking inside his house. “Oh god...”

“I’m really sorry, man. I-I didn’t tell you and that put you in danger but the way he fuckin’ *said* it it was like he wanted me to tell you so he’d have a reason to hurt you so I didn’t but I’m sorry,” Tommy rambles, one hand relaxing just enough to tug on a fistful of his hair.

“Hey, hey, Tommy, it’s okay. I’m not gonna blame you for something you were basically threatened into, okay?”

Tommy nods, but his eyes remain locked on the book. He flips back to the most recent page. From there, he works back.

“Wilbur is still resistant, but I have strategies in mind to cope with that. Once Tommy comes back it’ll be easier, but until then it’s not exactly hard to get Wilbur to go along with things. Sure, he whines, but he still engages. He’s lonely. I can tell. He tells me to leave Tommy alone, but I know him better. He wants his brother back. He’s already reliant on me for food and water. If I continue maybe I can get him to go along with my orders. If not there’s always more punitive measures I could take.”

Tommy flips back another page, heart beating faster.

“Tommy wasn’t especially receptive to the piece of Wilbur I brought him, but I know it got to him. I mean the brat already looked ready to faint, but that snapped something inside of him. He normally always keeps his eyes on me, but he closed them. Maybe he’s not as defensive as he lets on. He didn’t even try to run. A good sign. He hasn’t forgotten the rules.”

Tommy quickly flips back again before he makes himself sick.

“Ears bleed a lot.”

Nope. No. No fucking way. He’s skipping that one.

...but it’s about Wilbur. He needs to know what’s happened to Wilbur.

“Ears bleed a lot. It was a messy slice. Wilbur is harder to hold down than Tommy is. I healed him, though. He mellowed out pretty well after that. I think the bleeding made him faint. He might be even weaker than Tommy. Bet if I took a slice out of Tommy’s ear he wouldn’t faint. Just cry and be annoying. Maybe fainting is easier. We’ll see how Tommy responds to seeing it. I’ll wait until he’s alone. The pawn is asleep sure, but I wouldn’t be able to get Tommy out of here without waking him. I can wait.”

Tommy turns back another page.

“He’s not scared to go outside. I’ve seen him and his little protectors wandering around my server. He was scared by the bees. Something about them. Good to know.”

Back further still.

“There’s a lot to update on and not much time to do it. The brat is staying out in the snow in the middle of nowhere. When I have more time and security I’ll explain whatever happened in his little brain to make him defy me like this. I have a failsafe escape plan so I can check on him without risk. I found where he was hiding the journal easily. It’s not exactly hard. So, updates:

Wilbur is with me. Stubborn and useless like always. Tommy hasn’t broken down yet but I am going to incentivize him. He’s already sufficiently terrified. Just needs a little more push. It’s interesting to see how he interacts with the world outside of a lab environment now. Maybe I should’ve let him outside again to”

It cuts off there, seeming like another instance where Dream left in a hurry. One more page back.

“Other updates: Tommy killed himself (again) and he and Wilbur tried to trick me. Some bullshit story about limbo ‘ending.’ I think it’s a lie, but I can always press for answers later. I would’ve made them talk then and there but Wilbur got bold. I had to stop. He and Tommy were definitely just trying to stall for time. They were too late. I had to run, though. I shoved Wilbur back in the walls. Hopefully I’ll be able to tunnel in later and take him back, but I could only carry one. I picked Tommy obviously.

I’ve set up for a stasis chamber trap so he won’t get away again. I have one set up for me as well. I’m thinking down the line when I return to the mainland (to get Wilbur or for Sam’s attachments or maybe to hurt Tubbo, whatever) I can have Tommy bring me back. I’ll lock him in there so he’ll have to either activate it or starve. Something along those lines. We’ll see. In the mean time. I should bring him back now. He’s got to pay. For a lot of things. I honestly don’t know what I’m going to do to him yet. If I had Wilbur it would be easier. If it’s not enough, if I break him, bones, mind, whatever, and I still think I might tear him apart, I’ll have to stop and think it through. The only reason I’m updating this now is because if I don’t fucking calm down first I’m going to do permanent damage I know it. Not to say I’m against the idea, but I need to plan ahead, figure out how annoying it will be to have a puppet missing a limb. I’m going to bring him back, but I’ll make sure he wakes up alone. That way I can convince him I have Wilbur in the other room. I’ll hopefully get him back, but even if not he could be good leverage. Tommy won’t take a chance even if he doesn’t really believe me.”

This is back to that room, the stasis chamber, the plans he had for him. Okay. So Dream had only put in a few new entries. Each new entry was another night he had been in the room with him and Tubbo. Six entries too many. He wrote that he had an escape plan. What the fuck was it? How did he get out? Tommy isn't stupid. He knows why Dream wrote in the journal, and it wasn't for his own personal notes. He wanted Tommy to read it.

Tommy shudders. He's tired of doing what Dream wants.

"He wrote in it while we slept, Tubbo," Tommy says softly.

Tubbo stands. He can't bear to sit still for a moment longer. He paces the length of the room, hands shifting restlessly at his sides. "We should destroy it. Right? I mean, what good has it actually done for you?"

Tommy had wanted answers. He'd wanted some indication of where Dream might be hiding. Knowing this swept away any pretenses of value this fucking evil thing might have. It almost feels like an invitation, calling Dream in.

"I wanna burn it," Tommy stands, holding onto the book tightly. "You got a flint and steel?"

"Yeah, yeah one sec," Tubbo rummages through a chest before handing it to Tommy.

Tommy reignites the fire, stirring the coals until a log catches. He tosses the book onto it and feels nothing as paper stained with his blood furls and dissipates in a wave of orange shriveling into black. Tommy doesn't feel better.

"I don't want to live here anymore, Tubbo," Tommy says.

"I was thinking it too, bossman. I think we should move back to the mainlands, find something more fortified," Tubbo agrees immediately. "Don't worry, Tommy. I'm making plans. I'll stay with you during the day, and we'll organize a night watch, okay?"

"Who the fuck would want to do that?" Tommy sits on the floor, knees tucked into his chest, still watching the fire.

"The same people who are helping us search for Dream right now. And if they don't— I don't fucking care. I will make Ranboo share a shift with me. The three of us— We'll set it up so one of us is awake at all times. If we move houses, we'll have to move the stasis chamber setup too, that'll be a process, but we need to have people available," Tubbo resumes his pacing.

Tommy wishes Tubbo's conviction made him feel better. Right now, Tommy doesn't feel anything. The revelations and terror of the past hours have left him empty, hollowed out. He remains this way even as Tubbo pushes on. The sun rises, Tubbo calls together the server. By the time the day is done, the stasis chambers have been moved to Tubbo's old house on the mainlands, the house's walls reinforced with blackstone, obsidian, and iron bars. That makes Tommy a bit uneasy, sure, but it feels safer. Tommy manages a shred of gratefulness as he watches so many people volunteer to guard the house. Puffy, Eret, Sapnap, Sam, Punz, Phil and therefore Technoblade too, Ranboo of course, Jack and Niki volunteered the moment

they heard he'd been inside Tubbo's home. Tubbo continues to take the helm. Establishing shifts of two people per night, it split between them. The person will be stationed beside the stasis chambers. Their job is to only be a pair of eyes. No one expects them to hold off Dream alone. It feels like a good system. Tommy feels like he should care more about that. So many people lining up to keep him safe and Tommy can only think it's putting off the inevitable.

Tommy's emotions remain muted, as if behind a sheet of glass, until that night. Where Tommy goes to his new bed in the house, across the room from the stasis chambers, walls softened by wood that hides a layer of obsidian. Tommy thinks he might actually be tired enough to sleep tonight. A naive thought. His exhaustion is replaced by cold adrenaline, because there's a book underneath his bed.

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

CW: referenced violence and mutilation! Nongraphic, but it's there ya know. And the usual manipulation and horror. Oh and smoking

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tommy doesn't scream; he doesn't back away or run. He pulls the book out from its spot tucked underneath the mattress.

He opens to the first page.

"Conscious again, mild pain. Hard to gauge intensity since he whines so much anyway.

Saw Wilbur. Said it was 'familiar', will investigate further."

He snaps it shut, breathing shakily. With desperate, fumbling hands he flips to the most recent page. Something falls from between the pages, but he's distracted by the new entry.

"He's moved now. He took my advice to heart and moved back to the Mainlands. In this pathetic attempt at a fortress. I saw the pawn talking to a bunch of other people. It's almost endearing how confident they are. Like numbers matter in this game. We know better than that, don't we, Tommy?"

It's like the room gets darker, colder, as he stares at his own name. Tommy can only continue, transfixed by it despite every word being poison.

"It doesn't matter who you surround yourself with, who you decide to use as a shield, their sacrifices don't change that I still have Wilbur.

I told you before, Tommy. It's rude to go through someone else's things. Didn't we already do this part? You read my journal, you pay for it. But I'll allow it this time. This is a helpful way for us to communicate, right? That's why you've been reading it. You want answers. Answers only I can give.

The clock is ticking. But hey. Now you and your brother match. I couldn't give you the whole thing with the journal. But this gets the message across, I hope. You know it's only going to get worse from here. See you soon. For Wilbur's sake, right?"

Tommy stares at the page, fixated, because it's easier than doing the next logical step. Something had fallen from the pages. Tommy caves. He has to see it. He has to know. He has to get on his knees, crouching down to look under the edge of the bed. No white mask

stares back at him, but he sees it. A tiny, bloody thing. Tommy hesitates for only a moment, hand trembling, before he grabs it and pulls it back into the light.

“But hey. Now you and your brother match.”

It’s a fingernail. Tommy drops it, falling back to the floor, putting as much distance between him and it as possible until he hits the wall, he stares at it on the ground, eyes glassy and hollow, the only indication of any feeling is his chest rising and falling with his rapid breathing. Dream not giving him the whole thing is a weak mercy. Tommy looks away only to stare at his left hand. At the absence. He balls his hand into a fist and fixates on the wrongness of it.

Wilbur can’t play the guitar anymore. Maybe that shouldn’t change anything but it does. For Tommy, it changes *everything*.

“Tommy, you alright?” Tubbo knows something is wrong the moment he enters. “Wait... that’s– No, no fucking way that’s not–” Tubbo bottles his emotions, his bafflement, and focuses on the task at hand. “Tommy, is it? Just nod for me.”

Tommy nods.

“Okay, okay, fuck– Okay, Tommy, he is trying to psych you out. He could’ve made a copy. He could’ve easily made a copy, alright?” Tubbo is typing furiously on his comm.

“Yeah, it’s a copy,” Tommy says dully. “I know. Doesn’t got my blood in it.” A pause. “Scary as shit either way.”

“I know, Tommy,” Tubbo sighs. “Fuck– Are you gonna be okay if I leave you here for a minute?”

Tommy nods. He’s still staring at the floor.

“Okay, okay, I’ll be right back. I’ll– I’ll leave Punz, he was supposed to take the first shift tonight,” with that, Tubbo flees the room. That journal had appeared in the room within the last half hour. Tubbo is sure of it. That means Dream could still be on the mainlands.

Tommy nods again, even though Tubbo has already left.

How the fuck are you gonna tell him?

You’re not.

Tommy feels like his mind is buzzing, full of empty static.

“Tommy?” Punz quickly enters the room. “Tubbo said– Well, I don’t really know what’s going on, but I’m supposed to stay with you.”

Tommy glances up at him dully. “You getting paid for this, are you, Punz?”

“Would you believe me if I said it was altruism?”

“The fuck is that?”

Punz laughs before mulling it over. “I already got a flat rate from a job that fell through. I was supposed to follow Dream when they let him out of the prison. They never came to collect the payment, so. This is me... earning that, I guess.”

Tommy scoffs. “Pretty generous of you, aye, Punz?”

“I’m a mercenary, not a thief,” Punz frowns, as if insulted, despite that distinction being a lie. “I earn my pay. And that’s what I’m doing here,” he does a sweep of the room, silent except for the bubbling of the stasis chambers against the far wall.

“Must be nice,” Tommy mutters.

“What?”

“To not have people you have to protect without a paycheck,” Tommy doesn’t care if it’s cold. He’s had a rough fucking night.

Punz doesn’t respond for a moment, the silence stretching and Tommy wondering if he’d pissed off his guard enough that he’d leave him. “Yeah. Definitely makes things easier.” Punz does not sound like he’s being sarcastic.

Tubbo returns within the hour, out of breath and irritated. Tommy looks at him without much hope. Tubbo just shakes his head. “Thanks for staying, Punz, but I doubt we’ll be doing much sleeping for a while.”

“I can stay,” Punz offers. “I’m supposed to be here until 2.”

“Then Phil takes over, doesn’t he?”

“Yeah, but—”

“Trust me, I won’t be sleeping until then. If I sleep at all. You should go get some rest, man. I’m sure Sapnap will want you to help patrol tomorrow.”

Punz still looks reluctant, but eventually he leaves.

“You alright, bossman?” Now Tubbo gives Tommy his full attention, following his gaze to the journal still cast aside on the floor. “Do you want to burn that one too?”

Tommy shrugs. He’s been doing a lot of thinking. Pragmatic things, mostly. “Tubbo, you know the compasses Ghostbur made us?”

“What? Yeah?” Tubbo blinks, surprised.

“You lost yours, yeah?”

“What’s this all about, Tommy?” Tubbo looks nervous. He knows Tommy too well.

“I was just thinking, I think I want one connected to me again.”

“What? Why?” Tubbo is sharp. “That’s— That’s dangerous, Tommy, you said it yourself, if he got a compass—”

“But he won’t,” Tommy says firmly. “It’ll stay with you, alright? You’ll keep it in your enderchest in case of emergencies. That’s all. I want to know you can find me, Tubbo.”

Tubbo stares at him, worry softening into understanding. “Okay, Tommy. Okay, tomorrow we can... well, I guess we can’t ask Ghostbur but... but what if when Phil comes over later we ask him? That seems like something he’d know about, right?”

Tommy nods. “I don’t care what we do with it,” he still stares at the journal. “I mean, apparently it doesn’t matter if we burn it, right?”

“I am so sorry, Tommy. I don’t— I don’t know how the fuck he got in,” Tubbo is so tired of this.

“People have been coming and going all day, he could’ve snuck in any time with an invis pot,” Tommy waves him off.

“No, Tommy,” Tubbo says more intently. “I searched the room not even an hour before you found it. He was actually here *recently*.”

“Oh,” Tommy buries a shudder. He shakes his head. “Nope, nope I don’t wanna think about that— I can’t keep thinking about that— Fuck—”

“Sorry, Tommy, I— We can talk about something else!” Tubbo says quickly.

“Like what? The weather? I know! How about your pet bees?” Tommy says with a sharp, barking laugh.

“Oy! Uncalled for,” Tubbo says with little malice. A pause, sobriety returning. “We’re gonna find him, Tommy. We’ll figure this out.”

Tommy nods. “I know you’re trying.”

Neither of them feel reassured.

Phil knows a little about Lodestones. He exhales air from his cheeks, already daunted by the question. It *is* 2 am to be fair. “Well, normally lodestones are bigger. The smaller they get, they have to be intricate, so it’s harder to work with. I know the ones Ghostbur had set up— I dunno how he did it, the runes on the compass found you both, not a lodestone. He could’ve... used your hair for all I know. I’ve never seen anything like it, and that’s saying something for me, and... well, we can’t ask him.”

That turns their planning into a more somber dread.

“What’s... What’s all this for, then?” Phil is quick to change the subject.

“I want Tubbo to be able to find me. In case I... in case I get taken,” Tommy glances to Tubbo.

“Ah. Right. Got it,” Phil isn’t sure how to reply to that, however fair a concern it is. “Well, in that case, your best bet is to make the smallest lodestone you can. Maybe... fuck, I dunno, maybe Sam would be able to? He does careful redstone shit.”

“Or maybe Bad,” Tubbo points out. “He does all sorts of enchanting.”

“If it’s for... if it’s so Tubbo can find you, you’ll need it fuckin’ tiny, alright? Somewhere you can hide it. Maybe in your shoe?” Phil offers.

Tommy shakes his head. “He takes my shoes, remember? I was thinking... maybe on a necklace. Or I could find a way to clip it behind my ear, braid it into my hair, maybe put it on one of my teeth?”

“Oh, that would have to be *tiny*,” Phil says. “And that would not be comfortable, mate.”

“Well, I was thinking we could treat it like a cyanide pill,” Tommy says irritably. “I could keep it in my pocket and put it in my mouth at the first fucking sign of trouble.”

“Well, I worry if you keep it in your mouth you’d give yourself away trying to talk,” Phil points out. “Oh! What about an earring? Would he question that?”

Tubbo shifts uneasily. He doesn’t like that this conversation is sounding less and less hypothetical.

“I don’t know,” Tommy frowns. “I don’t actually think he’d take it out? He’d probably find a way to drag me around by my ear,” Tommy says with a bitter laugh. Phil and Tubbo exchange a look and Tommy is yet again reminded of how his version of normal is an evil thing.

“Okay, and we’d probably have to make it an earring back, because he might recognize something like that,” Tubbo is quick to push on. He doesn’t like it, but he’ll help if it’ll make Tommy feel better. “And piercing your ear— You sure you want to commit to something like that?”

“Why not? It can always heal.” Tommy turns back to Phil. “Do you think we could get one that size? Like... like a marble size or something?” Tommy asks.

“Maybe. I mean, it would take a really fuckin’ careful hand,” Phil says. “And it would be heavy. I dunno, it might weigh too much.”

“I could sew it into a shirt, too. Dream won’t give a shit if I wear the same bloody clothes.”

“But you’d have to wear the same shirt every day, Tommy. On the off chance he’ll get you,” Tubbo points out.

“Yeah, right,” Tommy sounds almost dismissive, growing irritated. “We could always replace a tooth with it. Have it stuck on like a crown so I’ll be able to talk with it.”

“Tommy!” Tubbo says it like Tommy has just said something awful.

“What?!” Tommy gets defensive immediately, oblivious as ever.

“We’re not ripping out your fucking teeth!” Tubbo snaps.

“Fine– Fine, we won’t, then!” Tommy folds his arms over his chest, pouting. Tommy stares at Phil. He hasn’t told him. He feels like he should. “Dream wants me back, you know.”

Phil looks unsure. “Er, yeah. I know. That’s why I’m here.”

“And he has Wilbur.”

Phil’s confusion turns to something wearier. “Yeah. I know.”

“He’s hurting him. And he’s gonna keep hurting him until I go back to him,” Tommy says it like a challenge.

“Jesus Christ, Tommy, we’re not serving you up on a platter on the off chance he’ll actually give us Wil back!” Phil looks horrified by the thought.

Tommy is actually disappointed. He’d been hoping for some backup.

“I think I’m ready to sleep now,” Tommy says.

“I’ll keep watch,” Phil nods. “You should get some sleep too, Tubbo. You’ll be no good to us tomorrow if you’re half asleep, alright?”

Tubbo reluctantly agrees.

Tommy curls up in a ball on his bed, staring at the wooden walls. He’s in a fortress, with a guard watching over him and a way to summon an army, his best friend who would die or kill to protect him, and still Tommy knows he is not safe. So he doesn’t sleep. Not for a long time, at least. Instead he lays awake and plans ahead. Maybe not all hope is lost, but it’s something close to that.

The next day Tommy has a goal. It won’t be an easy one to accomplish. His guard is constant, Tubbo looking like he’s scared if he blinks Tommy will disappear. Tommy needs someone who isn’t protecting him because they care. Maybe Tommy should feel grateful that that’s hard to come by, but it’s not like their caring changes anything.

“I’ll be fine, Tubbo. If I stay in the Mainlands for another minute I’m gonna lose my fucking mind,” Tommy rolls his eyes, playing up his ease for Tubbo’s benefit, acting like his hands wouldn’t be shaking if it weren’t for them being buried in his pockets.

“You can’t go alone,” Tubbo says firmly.

“I know, I know! Can you– Can you not take it personally if I say I need a break from you?” Tommy knows he’s being indelicate, but it’s the only way to unglue him. “And I won’t be alone! I’m going on patrol, with Punz!”

“Is that really a good idea?” Tubbo continues to fuss.

“Christ— yes, Tubbo. Me getting some fresh air with a mercenary watching my back is a *fine* idea,” Tommy sighs dramatically.

“And Punz said okay to this?” Tubbo pushes.

“Yes! I wouldn’t be going if he didn’t,” Tommy says. “Oy! Punz! You ready to go?”

Punz turns away from Sapnap, looking amused if not weary. “Yeah. Don’t worry, Tubbo. He’ll be safe with me. Besides, Dream hasn’t been spotted in... forever. Seems like the guy has taken to only working at night, so. I think it’ll be a quiet day.”

“Come on, Tubbo. You can’t stop me from doing what I want. It’d be *un-eth-i-cal*,” Tommy enunciates every syllable.

That’s the final straw. “Right, fine, but— But could please message me every so often?”

“Can do, Big T,” Tommy nods. “I just... I just gotta get out for a bit, you understand, don’t you?”

“Yeah. I do,” Tubbo says reluctantly. “Sorry, bossman. I just worry. I don’t know how you feel comfortable wandering off away from everyone, and I guess I— I wanted you at home because I want to know you’re safe,” Tubbo tries to explain, not to justify his harsh words, but to let Tommy know it wasn’t supposed to be a demand. He’s just scared.

“We can’t know that, Tubbo. He could get me anywhere, at least this way I’m somewhere I want to be,” Tommy says. He sounds too calm. He’s still not looking Tubbo in the eye. “I’m tired of waiting around and nothing happening. I’ve got to do something.”

Tubbo nods. “Okay. Okay, Tommy. I... I’m glad you are. I dunno how I was such a dick about this, when I should be proud of you— I *am* proud of you,” he says firmly. “I want you to be able to do things and to... not be so scared, right?”

Tommy manages a weak smile that neither of them quite believe, but it’s an attempt. “Right. I’ll see you later, okay?” Tommy means it, as he leaves Tubbo’s side. “It’ll be slow going, Punz. I’m not as spry as I used to be,” Tommy gestures to his cane.

“Yeah, I know,” Punz says. “That’s why I asked Sapnap if we could take the Western track. The prime path just past Eret’s castle. It’s away from the mainlands, easy to walk, should be good, right?”

“Oh, how *thoughtful*,” Tommy teases. Tommy waits until they’re past Eret’s castle to bring it up. “I got a favor to ask you, Punz.”

“More than me letting you tag along?” Punz gives him a look.

“Well, yeah, but— But I can pay you for it,” Tommy says quickly. “I’ve got 16 diamonds on me. And any of my valuables, whatever, I don’t want them. This is— This is more important.”

Punz stops, watching him with something that, if Tommy didn't know any better, would mistake for concern. "What is it, Tommy?"

Tommy hesitates now. If he says this, there's no going back. Worst case scenario, Punz tells Tubbo immediately and he's never left alone again. Other worst case scenario, Punz does as he asks. "I need you to turn away. For— For a half hour, I am gonna... I'm gonna scamper on off the prime path, and I'll meet you back here, ay?"

Punz seems to be calculating something. Which is a shame, as Tommy had been hoping he wouldn't ask questions. "Tell me why."

"To go take a piss— What's it fuckin' matter?" Tommy snaps.

"I don't agree to deals if I don't know what they are."

"Fuck," Tommy mutters. "Okay, if I tell you, you've got to promise me you won't tell anyone, alright?"

Punz sighs. "Come on, I can't promise that if I don't know what I'm agreeing to."

"I'll— I'll give you half the diamonds up front, and if you agree, you get the rest of them."

"Sixteen diamonds are worthless to me. Eight even more so."

"Fuck you, man—" Tommy huffs. "Okay, how about this, if I tell you, and you still refuse, you won't tell Tubbo, but I won't try to leave. Is that fair?"

Punz considers him for a moment. "Okay, keep talking."

"I'm gonna try and talk with Dream," Tommy's shoulders hunch inward, as he waits for the appropriate response.

Punz doesn't panic or shout at him, he just looks puzzled. "Why?"

"I need to bargain for Wilbur. Don't worry, I'm not gonna just turn myself over to him," Tommy says quickly. "But I can't take much more of this and Wilbur can't either."

"...And how do you know he won't just grab you, then?"

"Because he wants me to go back willingly, and I'm not planning on it," Tommy says irritably.

Punz is silent for a moment, thinking, reading Tommy's expression for a lie. "Okay."

"What?" Tommy hadn't actually expected this. "*Okay?*"

"I will continue my patrol, and I'll make my way back up this path in a half hour. If you don't turn up, I say you ran away from me and tell Tubbo. Got it?" Punz looks resigned.

“Yes! Yes, got it– Perfect. Thank you,” Tommy rummages in his inventory, shoving a handful of diamonds at Punz, before turning around, picking a direction, and walking off into the woods.

Punz watches him go with a sigh, setting aside the diamonds, and checking his comm. A half hour.

Tommy waits until the prime path is out of sight to start shouting.

“Dream!” Tommy turns around, unsure if he should expect to see a white mask beyond the trees or not. “DREAM! I’M FUCKING HERE!” Tommy shouts at the top of his lungs. “DR–”

“I’m here, I’m here. Quit shouting,” a voice grumbles behind him.

Tommy screams, stumbling back and almost falling over, catching himself on a tree. “F-Fuck–”

“What?” Dream says, aloof and amused. “You called?”

“D-Dream–” Tommy had wanted the man to appear. Doesn’t make this any easier. “How the fuck did you get here so fast–?”

Dream saunters forward, Tommy staggers further back, a hand raised to keep him away. “Did you have an offer to make me? Or are you just wanting to chat?” Another step closer, for Tommy another step back. “Or maybe you’re here to thank me!”

“*Thank* you?” Tommy is surprised enough to reply.

“Yeah! I took care of the bees for you,” Dream actually sounds *proud*. “They scared you, didn’t they? So I got rid of them for you! You know, a gesture of my goodwill.”

“You–” Tommy feels revulsion clawing up his throat. “*For* me– What the *fuck*–” he says hoarsely.

“Aw, you didn’t like it?” Dream feigns a pout. “What about my other gifts?”

“How the fuck did you get in that house?” Tommy snaps, bravery coming and leaving in a moment.

“I *told* you, Tommy,” Dream meanders between the trees, circling him slowly, Tommy keeps turning to keep him in sight. “I work in *mysterious ways*. ”

“Stop moving,” Tommy says, voice high and frantic.

“Oooh, making *demands*,” Dream sneers. “Getting bold, aren’t we?”

“P-Please,” Tommy backs up until he hits a tree, Dream always keeping pace.

“Good to know you haven’t forgotten all of your manners,” Dream stops his pursuit, standing a few yards away, hands folded behind his back, bouncing back on his heels like he’s waiting for something.

“I’m here to— to talk business,” Tommy still keeps a hand raised in front of him, even if Dream has stopped coming closer.

“Oh?” Dream sounds so fucking *amused*. “Decided to come home, finally?”

“N-No—” Tommy grimaces. “You— You have Wilbur.”

“Wow, Tommy. Smart as ever.”

“But I can’t go with you.”

Dream tilts his head, intrigued, not upset. “Go on.”

“But if you— If you stop, if you leave Wilbur somewhere a-and disappear forever, we won’t follow you. We won’t try and kill you,” Tommy doesn’t sound like he’s bargaining. He sounds like he’s begging.

“Huh,” Dream exhales a soft laugh. “I really thought you were about to break. I didn’t think you were pathetic enough to half ass it like this.”

“What?” Tommy’s eyebrows furrow together. Everything about this screams *wrong*, every fiber of his being is telling him to run, but he doesn’t move. He just listens.

“Between you and Wilbur, Tommy. I thought you were going to break first,” Dream cheerfully explains. “Right now Wilbur is still acting all noble, *leave Tommy alone use me instead I’ll do whatever you want!*” Dream laughs. “So, either you break first and you come home, or... you know I don’t have to tear Wilbur apart to hurt him,” Dream says it with something like patronizing pity, scolding Tommy for his pathetic efforts. “I can do anything I want to him and it’ll be your fault. You know I’m fair, Tommy. I don’t hurt people just because I can, I punish you for *your* actions. And as long as you keep refusing, I get to hurt Wilbur. Maybe I was wrong. Maybe Wilbur breaks first. He’ll start begging me to hurt you instead, *anything* to make it stop.”

Tommy stares at him, sputtering wordlessly. He is going to bury everything Dream had just said. That hadn’t been a part of the plan. He refocuses. “Please, Dream. Just think about it. If you let Wilbur go, you could— You could still catch me! Still drag me off. And if no one’s looking for you it’ll be easier—”

“Oh my *god*, just give it a *rest*,” Dream says exasperatedly, silencing him in an instant. “Enough playing around.” Dream swings his axe at his side, not raised, but a threat enough. “It’s time for you to *wake up*, Tommy. Smell the coffee! Your place isn’t *here*, it’s with me. And Wilbur. So, get over this little fantasy you’ve been living in, and come back to reality.” He steps closer.

“Dream you said you would wait you said you were gonna wait until I came back with you please don’t do this please—” Tommy doesn’t try to run, he slides to the ground and tucks his knees into his chest, covering his head with his hands and shutting his eyes tightly, waiting for the inevitable.

“Tommy.”

Tommy whimpers, flinching before curling even tighter into a ball as Dream’s voice emerges so softly right beside him.

“I’m not going to take you away. I think we’re... we’re making progress, the two of us, right?” Dream puts a hand on Tommy’s shoulder gently. “You’ll get your head on straight soon. And then Wilbur will be better, okay? Promise.” His sincerity almost makes it worse. Tommy believes every word.

Tommy can do this. He knows how to survive things like this. *Surviving it forever, eh? No. No, we have a plan. We can do this.* He stays curled on the ground, staring at the bed of dry pine needles beneath him, refusing to look over at the man kneeling beside him. “Okay. Okay fine I go with you and you let Wilbur go right?”

“Let him go? *Let him go?*” Dream laughs. He starts laughing and he doesn’t stop, falling back onto the ground, wheezing. Tommy wishes he could hate this man enough to kill him. Finally, Dream settles, still almost giddy. “I forgot how funny you are sometimes, Tommy. Is that what you thought was gonna happen?” Dream sounds fucking *delighted*, like Tommy just made his day. “No, no you come with me and he’s not being fucking torn apart. He’s not being punished on your behalf, that’s the deal. *Let him go,*” another chuckle. “God, Tommy, you’ve been gone for just a few weeks and the power has gone to your head. I’m in control, remember? Let him go,” Dream shakes his head, getting to his feet. “That’s brilliant— I can’t wait to tell Wilbur that one.”

“Wait,” Tommy forces himself to speak, fearing that Dream is about to leave. “Give me a week. One week to get my shit together, to—” Tommy feels a lump form in his throat. “To say my goodbyes, and I’ll go with you. You just gotta promise me you won’t hurt him in that time. Please.”

“Hm,” Dream considers him for a moment. “Interesting. I will... I will give you three days, Tommy. And after that... well, it’s not like I’m gonna pick you up at a train station and help you carry your suitcase, now is it? After those three days... let’s just say you’re fair game.” Tommy can hear Dream’s smirk behind that mask.

“Three days,” Tommy repeats. He doesn’t want to look at him.

“Yep. And I promise I won’t hurt him for that time. I’ll take real good care of him,” Dream still seems so amused by Tommy’s concern, talking about Wilbur like he’s Tommy’s pet guinea pig.

Tommy is not going to cry right now. He’s not going to break down in front of Dream.

“Okay. Okay, three days. You—” Tommy’s voice breaks. He takes a shaky breath, forcing himself to steady. “You win. Three days and I— I go with you.”

“Thank you for this, Tommy. I mean it. Truly,” Dream has a hand over his heart, giving Tommy a nod imitating respect. “You take care of yourself, now. I’ll... I’ll see you soon.”

Dream turns around and walks off into the woods. Tommy watches him leave. For a moment, Dream looks back at him, a second glance, assessing him. He seems to come to some conclusion, and continues onward.

Tommy stays there on the ground. When he shows up an hour later, covered in pine needles, eyes red and swollen, Punz doesn’t question it. He just lets them walk back in silence. Tommy is grateful. He doesn’t have much to be grateful for these days.

~

Wilbur is exhausted. His ear still stings and his hand aches and burns. It’s hot to the touch where Dream had cut his finger off, scabbed over, but irritated. Wilbur wonders if it’s gotten infected. He knows if an infection kills him Dream will just bring him back, but that’s not exactly a pleasant way to go. Wilbur is almost grateful he got to keep his filthy and bloody clothes, because at least he has a sturdy coat to keep some of the damp away, one with pockets. He’s kept the unlit cigarette safe. Yes, there’s a voice in the back of his head telling him he’s an idiot, that he shouldn’t accept *anything* from the generous hands of a monster, but it’s not like denying himself one potential mercy will save him. All things considered, he’s been in worse shape, the condition of his hand aside.

Dream had left him alone for a few days until he was half dead from dehydration, he’d returned and promised him water, saying that all he needed to do was hold still. Wilbur was barely conscious enough to protest, so he did as he was told. He didn’t move.

He didn’t move until Dream took a pair of shears to his left hand.

Wilbur’s feeble resistance stopped before he even got to the bone, he’d been on the verge of blacking out before Dream started carving into him, it was easy to let go. When he came to, the wound on his hand was healed over, scabbed by a health potion. Dream had left him a bottle of water and some bread.

That relief hadn’t lasted long. Wilbur is thirsty again. It’s distracting him from his game of solitaire. He doesn’t have a deck of cards, obviously, but he can at least occupy himself thinking of how a game might go if he did. Wilbur had been hoping Dream would come, if only so he might get some more water, but he still flinches when the stone wall slides open, Dream entering with too much arrogance in his step.

“Hey, Wilbur,” Dream leans against the wall across from him. “Done anything exciting since I’ve been gone?”

“Hilarious,” Wilbur says with a dry cough.

A pause, Dream seemingly waiting for something. “Don’t you want to know?”

Wilbur’s eyes narrow. “Know what?”

“How Tommy is! Aren’t you curious?” Dream sounds like a child excited to show a teacher a drawing they made.

Wilbur knows Dream won’t give him an accurate update, but he does want to know. He wants to know how close Dream has gotten to Tommy, or if Tommy is maybe experiencing some peace. “How is he?” Wilbur asks carefully.

“Pretty good, I’d say. Tubbo moved him into a fortress and have set up a guard system because they know I’m closing in,” Dream says cheerfully. “I bet any day now Tubbo is gonna lock him in.” Dream stops, like he’s holding something back, hands fidgeting restlessly in front of him. “Then Tommy will be just *begging* to come back with me.”

Wilbur fucking hates it. Dream talks about Tommy– He talks about Tommy and *Tubbo*, like Tubbo is just looking after Tommy for him. Like Tubbo is playing pretend at controlling Tommy the way Dream does. Wilbur can try and glean some sense from it. Tubbo is helping to keep Tommy safe. Wilbur remembers Tubbo enough to know he would never lock Tommy away.

You never thought Tubbo would exile him either, did you?

“You sound confident, Dream,” Wilbur bothers with a reply. Dream will keep talking either way, Wilbur can at least try and get more information on Tommy.

Dream seems to be trying to contain some giddy pride, putting on a weak facade of calm. “I mean, I *always* knew it was gonna go this way. Like, I could’ve taken him whenever I wanted. All the... theatrics,” Dream gestures to him as he says this. “You know what this is, right?”

Wilbur stares. He doesn’t want answers. He asks anyway. “...What?”

“This is part of me *punishing* him, Wilbur,” Dream still sounds almost manic with excitement, a mad scientist explaining the logistics of killing a rat. “This is me reminding him of his place. When I hurt you, it’s because of what *he* did to get away from me, and the only way it’ll be fixed is when he learns his lesson and comes *home*. I’d say that’s a much more effective teacher than me just beating the hell out of him or breaking his legs or cutting his eyes out or whatever,” Dream lists the alternatives so casually.

Wilbur feels sick. Dream thinks that Tommy cares enough for Wilbur that knowing he’s being hurt is some how comparable to being *blinded*. Wilbur also knows that functionally, as Dream said, they serve the same purpose. Both force Tommy to stay with Dream.

Wilbur knows he won’t like the answer, but he can’t stop pushing down a dark path, staring at the sea lanterns reflected in the bloody water on the ground. “What then?”

“What?”

“If Tommy comes back, what happens then?” Wilbur glances up to that mask, but there is no expression to read nor a soul behind those eyes.

“Hm,” Dream tilts his head, arms folded over his chest as he considers this. “Two lab rats are better than one, y’know?” He shrugs. “You’ll like that, won’t you? It’ll make a beautiful story. You and your brother, dying together over and over and over again. Maybe I’ll let you kill yourself sometimes. Your first run was okay, but you could polish the writing, huh?” Dream can see Wilbur starting to shut down, to refuse to engage in this fucking horror show, but he pushes on. “We could make a game out of it!” Dream says excitedly. “You two could get a say in who dies and how! And— And if he annoys you, you can just shoot him! Or, well, I can’t trust you with a crossbow, so not *shoot* him, but I could give you a knife if you want. I bet you wish you could’ve done that back in the L’Manberg days. He won’t shut up and all it takes is a knife in his throat. You’d be surprised how easy it is!”

“Get the fuck out,” Wilbur snarls.

“No, no, really— Listen, this could be fun,” Dream doesn’t stop. “I have ideas. You could see who can hold their breath the longest, or who can run the farthest! I have an idea, if we set up stasis chambers— You know what, I won’t spoil it, but trust me, it’ll be fun, Wilbur.”

“Just shut up! Just shut up!” Wilbur struggles to stand. He knows he won’t actually be able to fight Dream, but he can’t take this anymore. Wilbur manages to stand, but that’s about it. He can’t lunge at Dream, he doesn’t even know if he can muster the effort to even try. He’s thirsty and exhausted and he knows Dream will laugh at him when he falls on his face trying to land one good punch on him.

“Okay, okay, fine, you’re right. I don’t want to spoil it,” Dream settles him amicably. “I’ll go. Hold on— you were good today,” Dream searches his pockets. “You still got that cigarette?”

Wilbur frowns, anger waning into hesitation. His self righteousness dies too quickly. Wilbur hasn’t learned how to push through this kind of weakness yet. “...yeah?”

“There’s like no ventilation in here, but hey, if you suffocate— No harm in that, right?” Dream waits, Wilbur still hesitates. “Well, come on then,” Dream nods at him. He has a lighter.

Wilbur takes the cigarette from his pocket. Dream had just enthusiastically reminded him of what a monster he is. He shouldn’t accept this. Wilbur holds it out to him. Dream grabs onto his wrist, holding his shaking hand steady as he lights it. Wilbur knows why Dream didn’t just give him a lighter, but he still hates it. Wilbur’s cigarettes are useless except when he gets a light from Dream. He has to get permission for every smoke. It’s humiliating and Dream knows it from the way he held onto his wrist, keeping a child still to administer a shot.

“You’re welcome. Keep your head on straight and behave yourself, and you’ll be out of here in no time!” Dream laughs. “Well, out of this *room* at least.”

“Somewhere dryer, perhaps?” Wilbur says irritably. He feels oddly embarrassed and hates himself for it.

“Maybe,” Dream is evasive. “There’s a reason for it, you know.”

Wilbur, almost out of habit, takes a smoke, coughing. It's been a long time. He exhales too quickly. "Yeah, what's that, then?" *Why are you engaging? Why is it so fucking easy for you to give up?*

"I thought it'd be obvious," Dream is as patronizing as ever. "An enderman is not gonna teleport into a flooded room, Wilbur."

"Oh. Right," Wilbur understands now. It's eerie how methodical this man is. The way Tommy described it, sometimes Dream just snapped and resorted to violence on a whim, but now, and from what Wilbur remembers before in the vault, Dream is too calculating, every action has something sinister behind it.

"Well, I'll see you later. Again— I'd keep acting like this if I were you. It'd be nice to have you moved into a better cell before Tommy gets here," and with that threat hanging in the air, Dream leaves him the dark, save for the orange glow of a lit cigarette. Wilbur feels guilty. Not guilty enough to stop smoking it. He is trying his best not to think about it, but Dream had said *before Tommy gets here*, not a matter of *if*, but a matter of when. He inhales more smoke with something almost frantic.

~

It takes four people to make a lodestone the size of an acorn. Phil, Bad, Foolish, and Ranboo all fuss together down in the spider farm. Tommy merely watches on. It's a funny sight. Phil looks tiny next to a seven foot tall half-enderman, a nine foot tall demon, and a 23 foot tall god who has shrunk himself to match Bad's height. Tommy had been a bit startled by the demigod Eret had referred him to for a project like this, but the guy is friendly enough.

Ranboo is quite good at writing out the runes, Phil and Foolish knowing what they should actually be, and Bad making sure the lodestone is put together correctly. In all honesty, Tommy has no fucking clue what they're doing. Tubbo watches the proceedings with him, a regular compass shifting restlessly in his hands. Tommy can tell this whole plan is still making him anxious.

"Hey, after this, how about you help me tear down the stone around my house? I know I can't really stay there yet, but I miss when it was dirt, y'know?"

"What? Oh, oh yeah, sure," Tubbo remains distracted. A pause. "You doing okay?"

"What?"

"With all of this," Tubbo is still not looking him, watching the sparks and blue shine of lapis as the project continued.

"Generally speaking, uh. Shit. But this stuff is... it's gonna help, okay?" Tommy means it. "As long as you can find me, Tubbo, I'll be alright." Tommy is holding onto that so tightly. This reassurance isn't just for Tubbo.

Tubbo tears his gaze from the group and looks at Tommy, finally worry waning for fondness. "Alright, bossman. I believe you."

Tommy does his best not to feel guilty for that.

The compass doesn't need an enchantment on it, just to be attuned to the lodestone. Tommy is guessing the compass Ghostbur made, the enchantment was on it and that's how it found them. Tubbo stares at it, at the needle pointing resolutely to Tommy's hand where he holds it.

"Perfect. Thank you, guys," Tommy says. He actually feels relieved. "Even you, Badboyhalo."

"What- What's that supposed to mean?!" Bad says irritably. "I do something nice for you and- You know what, fine! You're welcome."

Tommy tucks the lodestone in his pocket for the time being. It feels warm in the palm of his hand. He'll sew it into his shirt when-

When his three days are up.

"You wanna tear apart your house still, bossman?" Tubbo asks.

"Oh yeah! Definitely," Tommy forces a grin. He doesn't want Tubbo to worry. Tommy keeps fiddling with the lodestone in his pocket.

Tommy will spend these next days carefully.

Chapter End Notes

It's so nice that you all know where this is going. I don't need to save up the suspense, I get to just tear it down piece by piece! :D

We all knew this was coming, right? Slowly but surely, Dream is going to get Tommy back. I'm the one writing him and I want him Dead <3

As always, thank you for reading! I'm glad you all are still interested despite the inevitable.

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

CW: violence and suicidal thoughts

This chapter is almost happy. Sorry.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Three days is not a long time. Three days is a *blink* in Limbo. Tommy could have spent the rest of this mortal life trying to say the right goodbye, but he's known for a long time now his mortal life doesn't mean anything.

So he does what he can.

"Tommy? You still with me, bossman?" Tubbo notices when he starts to get distant. Tommy is trying to stay grounded, to take it all in so he'll have memories to cling to, but other times his mind wanders down dark tunnels that in a few days time could very well be his reality.

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm good, I'm fine," Tommy shakes his head, as if to clear the fog. His left hand remains in his pocket, four fingers fidgeting restlessly with the lodestone. "You were— What were you talking about, man?"

"The apiary? I was thinking about building another one, somewhere safer," Tubbo repeats.

"Oh," Tommy doesn't want to be callous, to tell him that there is *nowhere* safer. But hey, maybe once Tommy is gone Dream will stop doing things to hurt Tubbo. He doesn't realize that statement is an oxymoron. "That sounds like a good idea. Could I help?"

"Yeah!" Tubbo is excited in an instant. "I haven't decided where yet, but I was thinking maybe somewhere out of the way? I was thinking Snowchester at first, but Dream has been there. So, maybe out past Eret's castle so it's not easy to find."

"Yeah, yeah that sounds smart. You gonna make it out of spruce again?"

"Probably. I dunno. We still haven't finished securing the house yet, I think that will take precedent, but later on, it'll be something to keep us busy, right?"

"Why not start now?" Tommy says. "We can do both, can't we? Fix up the house and build the bee shit."

"I... I guess so," Tubbo seems surprised. Tommy had been barely paying attention, and now he's insistent. "You sure you're alright?"

“As alright as I fuckin’ can be, Tubbo,” Tommy says dryly. “Not exactly the best conditions.”

“Alright, fair enough. We could start getting wood together, then?” Tubbo offers.

“Yeah. Yeah, let’s do that.”

The afternoon is spent with mindless chatter and felling trees. There was even a brief moment somewhere in the middle where Tommy actually forgot. He forgot this was ending soon.

Ranboo comes over for dinner. Tommy fights tooth and nail to remain grounded enough to help him and Tubbo cook, to engage in conversation, to eat. It gets harder as he gets more tired. It gets worse whenever they bring up plans for the future.

The first day ends. Tommy stays up too late, trying to make the day last a little longer. It doesn’t feel like enough.

“Is it okay if I leave you with Sam for today, Bossman? Quackity wanted my help with some stuff,” Tubbo asks.

Tommy hesitates. “Can you not? Could you leave it until... until later this week or something?”

Tubbo looks surprised. “I mean, I guess I could. Why? Is something wrong with Sam?”

“No, no it’s not Sam. I just...” Tommy hesitates. “I worry about you. I feel better when you’re here.”

Tubbo grows fond. “Thanks, Tommy. I’ll be with people. I promise I’ll be safe, okay? And I’ll be back later today.”

Tommy feels an ache in his chest. He could get away with being clingy. If he told Tubbo he was scared, Tubbo would stay. No questions asked. He doesn’t want his best friend to worry about him anymore. “Yeah. Yeah, alright. I might wander a bit, then.”

“Okay, just be careful,” Tubbo says. “I know you said he wouldn’t come after you, but still.”

Tommy knows he can’t reassure Tubbo. The thought of doing so almost hurts worse. The thought of explaining why Tubbo *really* doesn’t have to worry right now...

“Fine, fine, I’ll be safe, quit fussing,” Tommy complains loudly instead.

“Okay, okay,” Tubbo laughs. “Bye, Tommy.”

“Bye, Tubso...” Tommy watches him go. Maybe finding some company wouldn’t be such a bad idea. The trouble is with a countdown hanging over his head, is he doesn’t know how to spend these precious hours. How is he meant to choose who he wants to have final memories with? There aren’t enough hours left for everyone, and outside of Tubbo, it becomes near impossible to pick and choose.

<Awesamdude> hey Tommy! Did you want to help me again today?

<TommyInnit> maybe later?

<Awesamdude> are you sure? Are you alone?

<TommyInnit> I'm safe. Trust me i would not be this calm

<Awesamdude> I don't know. I feel like this is a bad idea

<TommyInnit> good thing it's my choice to fucking make then right

<Awesamdude> point takne.

<Awesamdude> taken

<Awesamdude> okay Tommy. Let me know if you change your mind

<TommyInnit> thanks sam

Tommy doesn't know why he'd rather sit in his melancholy than spend the day collecting supplies for whatever Sam's current project was. There are lots of things he doesn't want to forget. Tommy instead chooses to walk around the server, aimless and fighting back the misery in his chest. He continues to fiddle with the lodestone in his pocket, a tiny thing, reminding him both of what is to come and his last chance of rescue he has to cling to.

It's the second day, and Tommy doesn't know where to begin.

He doesn't know how he's meant to remember how all this feels. The smell of grass, the wind, the taste of carrots. Tommy makes slow progress through the SMP. He's torn between looking down at the Prime Path, at every groove in the old wood, and looking around him. The server has already changed so much. He hasn't had time to see it all, let alone remember what it looks like.

Tommy lets himself wander aimlessly. It's a horrible thing, that this is the safest Tommy has felt because he knows Dream will wait. He'll be good to his word if only to hold that over Tommy later. Tommy is untouchable, but only for now. He doesn't know why he ends up here, but he doesn't mind it. He's still alone, but he's back at his old vacation house. The wooden structure is dirty, the roof beginning to sag in one place, but generally the cabin has held up relatively well. Tommy sighs, sitting on the back porch, looking over the low cliffside. The fence is busted in places too. He could fix it up. That's something.

Not like there's a point.

Tommy hears a branch snap behind him. He freezes. Dream wouldn't— He said— What the fuck would he be doing here?! They had a *deal* so what the fuck is he playing at—

A deep low sounds from behind him.

“The fuck– Could’ve *announced* yourself with a classic *moo* before you gave me a heart attack, y’know,” Tommy turns around, calming as big brown eyes stare back at him.

“Hello!” He coos. “You... You *can’t* be one of mine, making it out here after all this time? I mean, who was *left*,” Tommy extends a hand, the cow taking a slow, heavy step forward and pressing its big nose into his palm. “Harvey? You Harvey by chance?” Tommy scratches under its chin, the cow lifting its head, eyes drooping contentedly. “I’ll call you Harvey anyway, how about that? How’ve you been, man?”

Another low *moo*, Harvey shuffling past him, flopping down underneath the shade of a tree with a thud hard enough Tommy feels it through the ground.

“Me too, big man, me too,” Tommy sighs, sitting beside him. “Forgot about cows, y’know? Well, I didn’t like, *forget* cows were a thing or anything, I just forgot about this bit, ey? You guys are pretty poggers.”

Harvey doesn’t reply.

“Did you know, Harvey, that I’m a dead man? A dying man too,” Tommy leans against Harvey’s side, glancing to see if the cow minded, but Harvey hardly seems to notice him. “Got a countdown and everything. You don’t have to worry your pretty little head about dying, now do you? Not that cows are immortal– trust me, I *know* that– but you don’t gotta think about that shit. You got better priorities, eh? Grass. Uh, layin’ in mud. That’s the important stuff.” Tommy feels the warmth radiating from the thin, soft fur covering Harvey’s back, the rise and fall of his chest making Tommy move with it. Tommy wishes he could stay here forever. “What would you do, Harvey, if you only had two– well, a day and a half left to live?”

Harvey just turns his head, looking out over the fence away from Tommy.

“Yeah. Just enjoy it, right? Try not to worry about shit? That’s what I’m trying to do. Bit hard with the fuckin’ gun hangin’ over your ‘ed.” He knows he asked for a few days to say goodbye, but he almost wishes he’d just gone when Dream was there, or he’d said his goodbyes and then found Dream. He’d just wanted time and to know he wouldn’t hurt Wilbur during it. That had to be worth it, counting on Dream not simply lying to him. Tommy sighs, laying back and looking up at the clouds drifting lazily through the blue. He pulls his goggles down. The light softens. He shouldn’t sleep away his last days on earth, but it’s so warm here. There’s no one to bother him, just him and Harvey. It’s easy to drift.

“*Wil!*” Tommy bolts awake in a cold sweat, looking around the yard frantically for a white mask. There is nothing. Tommy leans back, covering his face with his hands, trying to catch his breath. “Dream... just a dream...” He sighs heavily, rolling back his shoulders like that will stop him from shaking. *Soon it won’t be.* “Fuck...”

Tommy needs to go home. For a few days more, he *can* go home, at least. At least he thinks he can. But that dirt house in the hillside– that’s not home. Maybe in some horrible way Dream is right. His promise that soon Tommy will come *home*. In a few days time Tommy will come back to Wilbur. Tommy is so tired of Dream being right. Tommy doesn’t move, still laying against Harvey, who has been perfectly content to nap away the afternoon beside him. It feels so trivial, but Tommy doesn’t want to leave him. Tommy sighs shakily, turning

and putting his arms around his neck. Harvey's thin fur scratches at his face as he shuts his eyes. He knows he should have bigger concerns, but the thought of never seeing an animal—a *living* animal—ever again makes it harder to hold back tears.

"You're a... a good lad, Harvey," Tommy clears his throat, to stop his voice shaking. "I'll have Tubbo stop by and check in on you after I'm gone, ey?" Tommy stands. "Gotta..." Another shaky breath, Tommy trying to unclench his jaw. "Gotta start working on that note, then. Tubbo deserves... he deserves a note." *He deserves so much more than a note. Shame that you've got nothing else to give. You've given Dream everything else. Nothing left now, is there?*

Tommy leaves. He joins Sam and spends a couple hours gathering materials. Sam doesn't push him to talk, but he still seems unaccustomed to Tommy no longer chatting constantly. Tommy wishes he could be as he once was. He knows it wouldn't change anything now, but it would've been nice to pretend. To be loud and insulting and wild. Now he just does as he's told. It's easier for him that way.

<Tubbo> Tommy do u want to work on the apiary

<Tubbo> if you're tired already that's ok but u said u wanted to do it soon

<TommyInnit> Not too tired for anything!! I'll kick your ass at apiary building shit

<Tubbo> ok then meet me by Eret's tough guy

Tommy rereads that message on the comm, fixating on Tubbo's name. He smiles in spite of himself.

"Tubbo!" Tommy calls his name, extending the *o* in a lilting tone, the moment he sees him.

"Tommy!" Tubbo jumps, almost dropping his axe, as Tommy comes through Eret's castle and back out onto the prime path.

Tommy grins. "I scared you!"

"Yeah, you started shouting right behind me," Tubbo teases back.

"Well, come on then, you just gonna stand around all day or you gonna put some work in? You remember what that's like, don't you, *president Tubbo*. Eh? Hard lay-bour," Tommy puts on his best condescending voice.

Tubbo laughs, rolling his eyes. "Okay, then, dickhead. You got an axe?"

"Yeah! Sam made it for me!" Tommy sets the diamond axe against his right shoulder proudly. "You boys and your fancy netherite. I'm the fuckin' salt of the earth! A man of the people."

"Uh huh. Your enchanted *diamond* axe really attests to that."

“Let’s stop talking tools, ey? I’m ‘bout to start swingin’ at shit, tree or not.” Tommy leaves his cane by the prime path.

He refuses to think that a five minute walk from here is the last place he saw Dream.

This day is easier. Tommy wants to hold onto the fact that it was easier than the day before. He falls asleep more easily, almost meditative, as he meticulously sifts through the memories of the day, cataloging everything he can. He considers writing it down, but it’s not like he’ll be able to keep the notes. He has to remember. So much of the world has changed for him, it’s overstimulating, painful, but he knows there’s good in it too. His warped perceptions don’t change that. He won’t let them.

Grass. Cool to the touch and damp. The dirt underneath is soft but dense. Not... crumbly.

Trees. Bark scratches at your skin if you hit it wrong. But sitting under a tree is great. The sun goes through the leaves. It makes patterns in the shadows. Remember the patterns. When you look up the green is so so bright. The bark isn’t always scratchy. Sometimes there’s moss.

Cows. Big! They’re so big. And warm and they smell... how the fuck do I describe the way they smell? Musty. Earthy. Kind of. Fuck. Don’t get upset that you can’t describe it right—Just try to remember it. Feel it. Okay. Okay, big man. Eyes. Cow eyes are big and gentle and they don’t have to worry about anything. Brown. Warm. Alive.

They’re alive.

The sun. The sun hurts. It didn’t used to. It hurts my eyes, but it’s good on my skin. It’s a different kind of warm. It lays on top of you all soft like, it doesn’t pinch the way fires do. Fuck, I’m gonna miss that.

Water. Moving water. The way a creek moves around your ankles... It’s been a while. I’ll stand in a creek tomorrow.

What else?

Food! Food is a weird one for you, Big T, but still, think it through. Carrots. Sweet, and biting into them... they crack, don’t they? Apples are like. Similar but not. They break different. Softer. The skin is different to the inside bit. If you accidentally bite the core, it’s so bitter. Cake. From Niki’s bakery. Or not her bakery anymore, but her city. The frosting so sweet it almost hurts. The cake is soft, like a spongy pillowy thing. And the frosting... Niki makes swirls and shit on the cakes. They always look nice. Fresh bread. That too. The way bread smells. And salt. Salt tastes sharp. But good sharp. Not like a knife sharp but the way pine needles are sharp. Sea salt is a little different. You breathe it in. And I guess it’s fishier. Maybe. Dunno, but it’s different somehow.

Sea breezes are nice.

Any wind is nice. When it tugs at your hair and gives you chills and shit. The noise it makes in the leaves. Sort of roaring? But soft. Soft roaring. Whatever the fuck that is. That and

the sun together... that's the best of it.

I hope it's sunny tomorrow.

But I also kind of wish it would rain.

Rain is nice.

It makes you cold but sometimes that's nice and all the drops running down you and shit. The way the world smells after it rains. The way you can smell the boardwalk over New L'Manberg, damp wood and grass and that pond-y smell of the crater. Mud puddles! Fuckin' mud puddles. When your feet sink into it. That's good.

What else? What else is there? There's so much more.

I'm so fucking tired.

...

...

There's Tubbo. And so many others, yeah, but. You need to keep Tubbo first.

Scars. He's stronger now. A bit bigger. Not taller than you, still a short fucker, but he's not a twig like you are. He doesn't wear a suit anymore. The plaid shit from Snowchester instead. Suits him. His scar makes it so his left eye doesn't open all the way. His hair has gotten longer. It's shaggy and shit, covers his eyes sometimes. His voice is the same, though. Mostly. Not as high pitched, but same way of speaking, Tubbo has. His voice goes up and down. It goes up to a certain peak, then the next sentence drops back down. Tubbo's laugh. Which one? How are you gonna hold onto a laugh?

There are others. There's Ranboo. Ranboo carried you home. He was so fucking careful. He makes some poggers potato soup. He's taller than you. Dickhead. Got the weird skin split down the middle like that. I think he's got freckles too maybe? Dunno. His voice is so deep and when he talks it's all slow and careful sometimes. He's a good lad, Ranboo is. He'll look after Tubbo. They'll look after each other.

Phil. Phil and the way he says 'aw, mate.' His fucked up wing makes him walk different, sort of unsteady like. He's got nice eyes. Eyes that aren't gonna fight you. Like that makes sense. Techno's got such a weird way of talking, doesn't he? Deep and sort of nasally and dry. Doesn't always pronounce his g's. He says 'bruhh' in that one way too. He's big. Pig sort of fella, inne? Yeah.

Sam has a nice voice too. Calm, but friendly. He fusses over you. He fusses over everyone. Ponk is cool. They're always so chill and shit. You used to have fun doing pranks, though. Those were good days. They took care of you, Tommy. Don't forget that bit. Puffy hugged you that one time and her hair felt like wool. She doesn't take any shit from anyone. Sapnap's voice cracks sometimes. Hah. He was very brave. He turned on Dream. For you. Quackity's smile always means trouble in the best fucking way possible. Always in that hat.

Niki. Niki's got a nice accent and a soft voice. She's gotten stronger too. She still always smells like bread. Her hair is... is it pink now? She said she was thinking about dying it brown and blonde but right now it's pink. Jack Manifold is. Bald. Badboyhalo is fucking annoying. And dumb. And he came to help save you. Fuck. He's a decent lad. Gotta admit it. Antfrost too. Fuzzy sort of guy, inne? And... Jack was good. He came to save you too even when he has every fucking reason to hate you. You should apologize. Eret's voice is really deep. They're always dressed sort of fancy. They gave you their sunglasses. They wear them 'cause they got white eyes, but they haven't... they haven't hurt anyone since the first betrayal. They're a good guy now. A good King. Foolish is new. He's fucking huge and gold and his voice does not match that. You won't forget that shit. HBomb looks like a lumber jack except when he looks like a cat. Connor is a little bitch in a sonic onesie.

There are others.

Dunno how you're gonna hold onto all of them, Big Man.

Tubbo. Remember Tubbo. You used to put your arm around him and he'd lean into you like he was gonna carry you. Now it's more like he puts his arm around you. Like he's the only thing holding you together. He calls you bossman. He sometimes laughs and you can hear it almost scrunch in the back of his throat. Usually when he's made himself laugh. He's your best friend. And he loves you.

And this is gonna hurt him so fucking bad.

Tommy needs to sleep, sleep and hope the memories stick. He needs them to.

On the dawn of the last day, Tommy wakes up with the sun and watches the shadows come through the iron bars on the windows, slanting against the ceiling, more defined as the sun grows brighter. He can hear birds outside. He should try not to forget about those noisy fucks either.

At breakfast, he eats slowly, but he clears his plate. Eggs and toast. The eggs a little under cooked, the toast crisp and crunchy. Tubbo seems pleasantly surprised to see him eating properly. He doesn't comment on it, though.

"We gonna work on the apiary again today?" Tommy asks.

"Well, the house still needs some work—"

"It's *fine*, Tubbo. We've got the stasis chambers. We're set," Tommy nods resolutely. "I'm the poor little guy who doesn't know how to cope here! I decide what we do. Look— Look Tubbo I'm giving you puppy eyes. You've got to do what I say now."

Tubbo snorts. "Fine, you little weasel. You want to work on the apiary so bad, let's do it, then."

"And make Ranboo come help!" Tommy adds cheerfully.

"Fine, fine, I'll see what he says."

“Cool, cool– I’ll meet you out there, yeah?”

Tubbo stops, puzzled, “why?”

“Gotta do some shit first. Important Tommyinnit things,” Tommy scoffs.

“Whatever you say, bossman,” Tubbo waves him off, heading down the prime path with his comm out, typing out a message to Ranboo.

Tommy heads the other way. It’s going to be a bit of a detour, but it’s important. He hates that it feels important. Fucking Jack Manifold...

Tommy first stops somewhere that hurts. Ghostbur’s home remains empty. It still has everything he needs.

Not long after, the scent of blaze powder stinging in his nose, he makes his way around the crater of New L’Manberg to the cabin up on the hill toward the ocean side. If Jack isn’t fucking home– He missed his chance. Tommy won’t feel guilty about it. He knocks.

“Tommy,” Jack looks surprised, and then immediately wary. “Can I... help you, then?” He says it like it’s an accusation, not an offer.

Tommy laughs roughly. “Uh, no you definitely can’t, but I’m gonna help *you*, ” Tommy rummages through his inventory.

Jack takes a big step back. “No, whatever you’re up to, leave me out of it–” He stops, surprised, as instead of an explosive or a dead fish or some other insult, Tommy shoves three bottles of fire res into his hands. Jack is stunned into silence.

“I– I got more.” Tommy takes Jack’s silence as an invitation and strides in past him. There’s a kitchen table covered in clutter and old bottles. Manifold land seems home to a hoarder at present. He sweeps his arm across it, things clattering to the ground, to make room. He unloads six more bottles onto the table as well as a dozen golden apples. “I... I’d give you a god apple, but I don’t have one. And I gave all my diamonds to... to someone else. So.” He nods. Like that settles the matter. “Guess I could’ve given you what’s left of my gold, but that went into the apples, eh?”

A weighted silence. Jack staring at him, his front door still open, his hands occupied holding the three potions. Jack stares at him, eyes as sharp as his cheekbones. Everything about him still brusque. But he doesn’t seem angry. Tommy takes some pride in that.

“What the fuck, Tommy?” Jack finally speaks up, dropping the bottles onto the haphazard pile. “Are you plotting to kill me? Sorry– kill me *again*. ”

“No, no, man, it’s not that at all. I... When I pushed you, that day, Jack, I wasn’t thinking clearly. Didn’t have my head on straight. And I got startled and– And then I got mean, didn’t I? I shoved you back and instead of helping you I just... I kept going,” Tommy feels a sour pang of guilt in his gut. He feels *guilty*. For *Jack Manifold*. Great time for Tommy to

become a beacon of grace and compassion, he supposes. Maybe once he's gone they'll make him a saint instead of a missing person.

Jack stares at him like Tommy just told him they were getting married. That is, baffled, indescribable horror.

"So. I'm sorry," Tommy forces the words out with a wince. And still, Jack doesn't speak. Tommy just waits, until— "Wait, wait the fuck do you mean 'kill you again'?" Humility is exchanged for something rougher.

Now Jack can respond. "What do you mean?"

"What do *I* mean— the fuck do *you* mean?" Tommy snaps. "Kill you— Did you die? Did someone kill you while I was gone, Jack?"

"Did someone— You did!" Jack is shouting at him now. "You fucking killed me! What the hell did you think would happen if you push someone into lava?! I lost— I lost all of my things! I lost a fucking *life* and you didn't— You don't even..." Jack trails off, as soon as it had come, the anger drains out of him, Tommy staring back with genuine confusion, even concern. "You didn't know."

"I... No. No, I fucking didn't," Tommy's conviction, his relief at amends made, dies in an instant. "I am... so fucking sorry, man. I didn't— I didn't go back for you."

"Yeah, well, took a while for us to go back for you too. So, call it even," Jack sighs. He leans back against the table, arms folded over his chest. "Why're you being like this, man?"

"What? Being *better*?" Tommy says mockingly. "Are you really that surprised?"

"Well—" Jack gives him a look. "Tommy, there's something wrong. I know it. I'm not... ungrateful. And I guess I don't think you're the biggest dickhead in the world, but this, from *you*." Jack stares at him, trying to read that expression. "It's... It's got to be *something*, it's just weird."

"Is not," Tommy snaps.

"Is to!"

"It's— It's fucking nothing, Jack! I am trying to do better. I... I didn't think I'd get the chance to live again, so. What can I say, I'm a changed man," Tommy says sardonically.

Jack's eyebrows furrow in genuine confusion. "Why're you... why're you bothering with trying to *be better*?"

Tommy looks almost amused. "Not much else to do around here, is there?"

"You're a... weird kid, Tommy."

"You're like a year older than me. The fuck do you mean *kid*?"

“Yeah, shut it, you’re a kid, maybe I’m still a kid, however you wanna say it,” Jack pushes ahead. “Tell me, Tommy. What are you actually planning?”

“Nothing you need to worry your pretty little bald head about, Jack,” Tommy scoffs.

“If you get yourself into trouble, Tommy. It’s gonna hurt Tubbo,” Jack grows all the more grave, staring at Tommy, a warning behind his eyes. “And if you hurt Tubbo, I’ll have to kill you. *Then* we’d be even.”

Tommy laughs, perhaps too genuinely. “I’ll hold you to that, Jack. Go ahead and try to kill me one day.”

“Are you...” Jack is still trying to wrap his head around this, ignoring Tommy’s unnerving lack of sentimentality around death. “Are you okay?”

“Wot?”

“Are you okay, Tommy?” Jack sounds like he *means* it. Jack, with every right to hate him, is looking at Tommy like he’s scared for him.

Tommy coughs, burying a lump in his throat. “Yeah. All things considered. I had... I had a good day yesterday. And I’m gonna have a good day today.”

It’s like Jack *knows*. “What about tomorrow?”

Tommy hopes Jack doesn’t see him flinch. “Who knows. Bit of a coin toss, innit? And on that note, I’m gonna leave you to your... whatever you do all day.”

“You’re fucking nuts,” Jack shakes his head, but there’s less bite to his words now. Maybe even something fond.

Tommy heads for the door, pausing only for another moment. “Alright, take care of yourself, then, Jack Manifold. Try and... try and be better, yeah?”

Jack watches the boy he had wanted dead not long ago walk away from him, and for the first time in so long, he wants to live up to Tommy’s expectations. Be better, not worse. He doesn’t say it aloud, but he thinks it, clear as day. *Be safe, Tommy. I don’t want to mourn you again.*

Tommy doesn’t like knowing he killed Jack. He almost wishes he never found out. But he’d made amends. He’s sure there’s other people out there that he’s fucked over, but Jack is the only one he’s pushed off a cliff into a sea of lava. So. Precedent.

Tommy doesn’t go directly back to Tubbo, first he stops back at his home and writes a note. He probably could’ve spent the rest of the day writing that letter, but he’d rather actually spend time with Tubbo while he still can.

Tommy finds Ranboo and Tubbo sitting on the edge of the prime path a ways behind Eret’s castle.

Tubbo has a stick, drawing an outline in the dirt. “So, I’m thinking this way, we’ll be able to hide it better, see? The dome will still need to get to the sun but—”

“Hello?!” Tommy shouts as he is wont to do. This time Ranboo jumps.

Tubbo looks back and grins, “hello?!” He replies with the same indignant tone.

“Hello?!” Tommy parrots back, gruffer and louder this time.

“Hello?!“

“Okay, you can stop the bit now, I’ll get offended,” Tommy teases.

“Then come here! I’m showing Ranboo what I’m thinking.”

Tommy comes closer, leaning over Tubbo to look down into the dirt. A line goes across, with what looks like a pit underneath it, as well as a half circle covering the top. “What’s that supposed to be?”

“I’m thinking if we keep the apiary mostly underground, it’ll be harder to spot. We can’t cover the whole thing, obviously, we need the sun to come in, but it will be hidden below the treeline,” Tubbo explains, gesturing to the dirt with his stick.

“Aren’t you clever, Tubs?”

“Thank you! I am!” Tubbo responds brightly. “Come on, then, I found this spot that’s like, down a hill so you can’t see it unless you’re looking for it.” He stands and begins walking toward the treeline, Tommy and Ranboo following.

“I was going to start digging,” Ranboo tells him, shovel swinging at his side.

“That makes sense for you, eh?”

“It... does?” Ranboo frowns, puzzled.

“Grass n’ shit, right?”

“Oh,” Ranboo laughs. “Yeah, I guess so.”

Tommy is happy to haul logs, even if Tubbo keeps on asking him if he’s well enough to keep going and Tommy keeps telling him to shut up and let him be a big man. Tubbo doesn’t mind. Tommy seems more like himself than he has in a long time.

Toward the end of the afternoon, Tubbo’s communicator pings.

JackManifoldTV whispers to you: im worried about tommy. He was acting weird early.

JackManifoldTV whispers to you: don’t want to make any assumptions but you might want to stick him on suicide watch.

Tubbo stares down at his comm with a frown, glancing up to Tommy throwing sticks and dead leaves down into the growing pit so they'd get stuck in Ranboo's hair. So far they just have the base, the pit held together by logs upright and put into the ground. Tommy has stopped working for the moment.

You whisper to JackManifoldTV: weird how

JackManifoldTV whispers to you: he apologized to me. And gave me some of his belongings. So.

You whisper to JackManifoldTV: Apolgized to YOU

JackManifoldTV whispers to you: yeah

You whisper to JackManifoldTV: thank you Jack

JackManifoldTV whispers to you: don't mention it

Tubbo puts away his comm, watching Tommy carefully.

Tommy cackles, hopping down into the pit beside Ranboo. Tubbo comes closer, looking over the side to see Tommy trying to pull Ranboo to the muddy ground. That failing, he grabbed a fistful of mud and smacked it right into the middle of Ranboo's white shirt.

"That's it— You're in for it!" Ranboo grabs a lump of grassy earth and chucks it at Tommy's head like a snowball.

"Tubbooo!" Tommy shouts. "Helppp! Your man is attacking me!"

"I think you might've started it, bossman."

"Slander!"

"Look at you up there all high and mighty— You should come down here and prove it!" Ranboo taunts.

"I was on *your side!*" Tubbo feigns offense.

"So what? You're not participating! No say!" Ranboo nods like that settles the matter.

"Can't believe I'm saying this, but Ranboo is right. Put your money where your mouth is, bee boy!" Tommy tries to grab Tubbo's ankle to pull him down. Tubbo steps back.

"Fine, fine— You want me to *participate*? Actually, I think I'll do you one better— I'm going to fucking *win*," Tubbo hops down beside them, grabs his shovel, and uses it to catapult mud up into Ranboo's face.

Tommy cackles, barking and harsh. "Kick his ass, Tubbo!—" He's cut off by a facefull of grass.

They get tired out within the next five minutes. It's strange, not much younger than they are now, Tommy knows he and Tubbo could've kept rough housing and causing trouble for much longer.

"Maybe..." Ranboo says breathlessly. "I should stop wearing suits all the time. At least when I'm hanging out with *you* two."

"I'd take offense to that, Ranboo, but you're right. You gotta try something else, man. Put on a hoodie for fucks sake," Tommy says pointedly.

"Hm. Noted," Ranboo says dryly.

"Well, I think that's enough work for the day," Tubbo pulls himself out of the pit with ease, ignoring the ladder they had propped up on the side.

"What?" Tommy sits up. "But we're not done with the— With the apiary shit."

"Yeah, I don't think we're gonna finish this in a *day*, bossman," Tubbo laughs.

Tommy looks almost frantic. "We can do it! We can finish it today if you don't pussy out on me."

"You okay, Tommy?" Tubbo grows more worried. He will heed Jack's warning, but right now all he can do is watch Tommy closely. He doesn't want to push. He doesn't want to make Tommy shut down.

"I mean, it's gonna be sunset in like a half hour, so. I'd rather not work in a dark forest," Ranboo points out.

"Sunset?" Tommy still seems almost startled. "Okay, okay we'll go watch the sunset, then."

"That's... That's fine, Tommy," Tubbo frowns down at him.

Tommy hates being watched. "And before we go— We're gonna carve our names in this, alright? We've finished the base! Not like we're gonna carve into the glass, but I wanna take credit for my work!"

Tubbo sits back down on the edge, legs swinging over the logs. "*Our* work," he rolls his eyes fondly.

"Right, fine, you two helped too, I guess."

"Don't you want to wait until it's finished? We still need the glass and—" Tubbo looks doubtful.

"Nah. This was the important bit! So come on, carve it. You too, Ranboob." Tommy searches his pockets. He hesitates, brushing against the lodestone still loose. He'll have to sew that in his shirt soon. He'll put on something clean after this and then do it. "Aha! Here we are," he returns with a pocket knife.

“Okay, where do you want to put it?” Tubbo hops back down.

Tommy picks a random log and begins scraping off the bark until there’s a smoother patch.

TOMMYINNIT WAS HERE

WE BUILT THIS

—“How d’you spell apiary?”

“A, p, i, a, r, y,” Ranboo spells it out for him.—

APIARY.

THE BIG T’S AND BIG R.

THE GREATEST OF MEN.

It’s choppy and messy, but it’s legible. Cut in deep enough to stay. Tommy finishes by adding a single *T* at the bottom. “Now you sign it.”

He hands Ranboo the knife. Ranboo carves an *R*, smaller, just below it and to the right. He passes it to Tubbo. Tubbo adds his own *T* to the right of Tommy’s and just a bit above Ranboo’s, their letters in a loose triangle, close to one another.

Tubbo steps back, standing beside Tommy, Ranboo on his other side, admiring their work. Tommy nods approvingly. “Not too shabby, boys.”

“Looks like the sun is starting set. Did you still want to go watch it?” Ranboo nods up to the treeline, where a hint of pink is just beginning.

“Shit– Yeah, we gotta hurry. Gotta make it to the bench,” Tommy scales the ladder with surprising speed, Ranboo and Tubbo having to make an effort to keep up. “Good! We’re in time,” Tommy half runs the last stretch to the bench, the sun halfway down from the horizon. “One sec, one more thing—” He searches his enderchest. “Blocks! Let’s do blocks.” He puts in the disc.

Tubbo sits beside him. Tommy moves to the middle of the bench, so Ranboo will sit on his other side. After that he doesn’t look at them, merely stares straight ahead. He gives the slightest of nods, as if he’d just sorted something out. “Good. This is good,” he says it so softly under his breath, Tubbo thinks they weren’t suppose to hear it. Tubbo is tired of being scared for Tommy. He wants to be there for him instead. So he takes Tommy’s hand and watches the sunset.

It sets, and still Tommy doesn’t move. The disc stops playing. He still doesn’t move. More time passes and Tommy realizes his friends give no indication of moving without him.

“Can you stay with me?” Tommy asks. “Just for a little while longer.”

“Long as you want, bossman,” Tubbo says. Ranboo hums an *uh huh* in agreement.

“Good,” Tommy stands and his friends follow without question, even as he climbs the sloping hillside of his house. There, Tommy lays on his grass roof. “Come on. Look up,” Tommy pats the patches of grass beside him, Ranboo and Tubbo taking their respective places.

“Tommy...” Tubbo begins to speak, hesitating.

“It’s... it’s fuckin’ *massive*. Isn’t it?” Tommy speaks first.

“What?”

“The... the sky. The whole of it,” Tommy raises his hands and gestures to everything above.

“Nice view. They’re all just up there, all the time, and we get to look at ‘em.”

“Look at what?” Ranboo looks over at him, inquisitive.

“Stars, dumbass. Looking at the stars,” Tommy teases. “It’s... It’s scary. But nice too. How big it all is.”

Tubbo squeezes Tommy’s hand. “I won’t—” His words get caught in his throat. *I won’t let you die*. He cannot say that to him. He won’t. “I don’t want to lose you,” he whispers instead, soft enough that if Tommy wants to he can pretend he didn’t hear him.

Tubbo might have imagined it, but he thinks he hears Tommy inhale sharply. Tommy doesn’t look over at him. He just squeezes his hand. Tightly. At first Tubbo thinks that will be the end of it, that that’s all he gets, but then Tommy replies:

“I don’t want to leave you.”

Tubbo feels like that should make him feel relieved. From what Jack had said, he was scared Tommy was a suicide risk. For some reason it just deepens the ache in his chest.

Tommy almost wants to stay awake through the whole night, but there’s still things left for him to do. He doesn’t know what Dream’s timetable is, but he thinks he should have the lodestone sewn into his shirt before midnight. The three of them head back to Tubbo’s house, Tommy looking back over his shoulder as they walk away from his home in the hillside. It’s made of dirt now. There are a few wildflowers outside of it. Not a bad way to leave it, he thinks.

“I gotta get all this mud and shit off,” Tommy heads for the bathroom with new clothes in hand.

“Fine, you go first, no need to *ask* when you’re staying in someone else’s house,” Tubbo says sarcastically.

“I’m the *guest* I can do what I want!” Tommy calls over his shoulder.

Tommy takes a long time washing the mud off. He doesn’t know when he’ll be able to be clean again. Mud is easier to wash off than blood and gore. After, Tommy sits on the edge of the tub with a needle and thread, meticulously sewing a tiny pocket into the inside of the

seam in his shirt below his arm. The lodestone feels uncomfortable, pressed into his armpit, but it doesn't seem like it'll move and it's impossible to notice from there. Dream could grab him by the scruff, strangle him, stab him in the back, whatever, and he wouldn't notice the sewing job. Good. Well, maybe if Dream decided to saw off his arm at the shoulder, but Tommy is just barely hopeful enough to think that he won't.

Okay. The lodestone is in place. The letter is in a chest in his old house, one at the foot of his bed. Tommy had also emptied his Enderchest into there. He won't be able to keep the discs or any other bits of sentimentality, but he doesn't want those things to disappear with him. He wants Tubbo to have them. Tommy hopes they'll go through his belongings at some point and find it. Surely they will.

Now comes the hard part. He has to wait. Tommy knows he should try and get as far away from Tubbo and Ranboo as possible when his time runs out, but Tommy cannot bear being alone right now. Dream is good at creeping around. If he wants to abduct Tommy tonight without waking Tubbo and Ranboo, then that's what he'll do.

"Good night, boys," Tommy falls face first onto his bed. The blankets smell like Tubbo's house. Like wood and earth. Tommy buries his face in his pillow and tries not to cry.

These past three days, no matter how hard he tried to make them worthwhile, will never be enough.

"G'night, Tommy," Tubbo says from the other side of the room. "Ranboo's got first watch and then I'll take the rest of the night. So, if you need anything..."

Tommy hadn't thought about taking watch. About the stasis chambers. He wonders if Dream expects him to slip away when they have their backs turned. Tommy doesn't doubt that Dream could kill Ranboo easily, but all Ranboo has to do is press a button and suddenly they have a wall of protectors right there. So surely Dream will wait. Tommy doesn't know anymore. He's so fucking tired of this.

Tommy is dead. His body is lowered into the same grave he had been taken from. And Tubbo is alone. This time the grave is not empty when Tubbo stands over it. He falls to his knees.

"I tried. I swear I tried to save you this time. I know I didn't before, but I tried this time. I tried."

Tubbo does not expect a reply from a gravestone. He does not get one. Instead—

TommyInnit whispers to you: no you didn't. You didn't try. If you had, why would I still be dead?

Tubbo drops the comm.

Tommy's, last Tubbo saw, should be six feet directly below him. No one should be able to message him from Tommy's comm.

TommyInnit whispers to you: miss you, boss man! We should hangout more.

TommyInnit whispers to you: I just havent had much time really. Not since you let Dream take me away again.

TommyInnit whispers to you: he's been doing a lot of journaling lately if you catch my meaning

TommyInnit whispers to you: come on that was funny. Lighten up.

TommyInnit whispers to you: meet at the bench?

TommyInnit whispers to you: ?

Tubbo does not type out a reply. His blood runs cold. Out of the corner of his eye, up on the cliffside a dozen meters away, is the bench. He cannot see it right now. All he'd have to do is look a little to the left—

TommyInnit whispers to you: I see you!

Tubbo jolts awake with a gasp.

“Tubbo?!” Ranboo is at his side in an instant. “Are you— Are you okay?” Ranboo kneels down beside him, a gentle hand on his shoulder as Tubbo breathes frantically.

“F-Fine— I’m fine—” Tubbo waves him off. He steadies his breathing soon after, head in his hands. His head feels too warm. His shoulders ache. He needs to relax. He definitely won’t be getting back to sleep any time soon. “Trade off,” he nods Ranboo away.

“What?”

“My turn. Trade off. Get some sleep,” Tubbo stands, taking his axe with him to the chair by the stasis chambers.

“You sure you’re okay?” Ranboo whispers.

“Fine, Ranboo. Just need some time,” Tubbo brushes him off brusquely.

“Wake me. If you need me, okay?”

“Good night, Ranboo,” Tubbo says more firmly.

Tubbo sits back in his chair, closing his eyes for a moment, just until his heart slows. He looks over to Tommy’s bed in the corner. He feels a sharp moment of panic. He can’t see Tommy. There’s a messy pile of blankets, but that doesn’t mean Tommy is buried under them. Tubbo, before he can stop himself, crosses the room and reaches out to pull back the blankets.

Then Tubbo is flat on his back, the wind knocked out of him, a weight pressing down on his chest and a sharp pain from his throat. Tubbo’s eyes refocus on Tommy on top of him, eyes wild and teeth bared. He doesn’t look like himself, he looks like a cornered animal, ruthless

and terrified and impossible to reason with; for a moment Tubbo isn't just scared *for* his best friend, he's scared of him.

Nothing happens. Tommy remains unharmed and in control. Tommy isn't used to it going this way. Tommy blinks, glancing down from Tubbo's terrified eyes.

He sees blood.

Tommy pulls the knife away from Tubbo's throat with a trembling hand, throwing it aside.

"Oh no— no no no *no no this can't be happening fuck—*" Tommy presses his hand down on Tubbo's throat even as Tubbo chokes on a cry of pain. "*Ranboo!*" Tommy screams at his friend watching on in petrified horror. "G-Get a health pot! Go— Fucking get one right now!" Tommy almost sounds like he's sobbing. Tubbo's hand scratches at his, trying to get him to let go. "N-No, it's gonna be okay, it's gonna be okay, Tubbo. I'm sorry— I'm so sorry I know it hurts but it's gonna be okay, eh? I know it hurts but we'll g-get you fixed up real soon—" Tommy forces a smile with a feeble whimper.

Tubbo sits up, bigger and stronger than Tommy, and pushes him off.

"T-Tommy—" Tubbo rasps.

"I didn't mean to!" Tommy's voice is shrill and shaking. "I didn't— You gotta— You gotta put pressure on it— RANBOO!" Tommy shouts toward the stairs Ranboo had disappeared up. "Fucking hurry! We—"

"Tommy!" Tubbo shouts louder this time.

"D-Don't talk, it'll— it'll make it worse—"

Tubbo grabs Tommy by the shoulders, forcing him to look at him, at the blood dripping down to his chest. "I am okay," Tubbo says forcefully. "You— You barely nicked me, bossman. *I am okay,*" Tubbo says firmly.

Tommy glances from the blood covering Tubbo's neck to Tubbo's determined and cognizant eyes. "You're..."

"You barely scratched me. It hurts like a bitch, but I'll live, okay?" Tubbo gives him a weak smile.

Tommy stares at him, from the cut to Tubbo's earnest expression. He nods, all of the fight drained out of him, he lays back on the floor, going to cover his face with his hands before stopping as he sees bits of Tubbo's blood he'd managed to smear all over them.

"I-I'm sorry," Tommy says thickly, another sob rising in the back of his throat. "I thought— I thought you were—"

"I know, Tommy. But you don't need to apologize for it. I understand, promise," Tubbo accepts the health potion from Ranboo gratefully, the pain dulling and the wound becoming a thin, white scar immediately. "See? All better. I'm fine."

Tommy stares, fixated on the tiny scar on Tubbo's neck. "I'm sorry," he says again.

Tubbo nods and does his best not to look weary. He takes Tommy's bloody hand, grabbing the blade from the floor with the other, folding the pocketknife closed. He offers it to Tommy.

Tommy takes it with shaking hands. It's the same knife they'd used to carve their names into the apiary with.

Tubbo carefully folds Tommy's hand over it, gentle to the last. "We're both alright, bossman. We're both here, and we're both alright."

Tommy manages a nod in return, but now all he can think about is that it's after midnight. Those simple days of *we're both alright* had ended earlier that night.

~

"Wilbur!" Dream wakes him cheerfully. "You awake? Rise and shine! Today is... it's a good day."

Wilbur squints blearily up at him. He groans, pulling his jacket over his head irritably.

"Come on, Wilbur, it's a good day for *you*. You're getting out of here! Won't that be nice? Well, out of this *room* at least."

Wilbur looks back up at him suspiciously. "The fuck d'you mean? What's the fucking price, then, Dream?"

"Wilbur, you have to learn, it's not about the *cost*, it's about what you earn! You've been behaving well lately. You haven't tried to attack me, you've spoken to me, you haven't tried to kill yourself. So you're getting out on good behavior. No catch. Just know if you *do* any of that stuff, there will be... let's just say, consequences worse than being put back in here," Dream muses thoughtfully. "So! Come on, then. If you need more incentive— I won't bring you any food in here."

"If I refuse?"

Dream laughs. "Uh, *why*?" He scoffs. "You and Tommy have *so much* pride, don't you? You're like a couple of stupid fish swimming upstream. If you refuse, you stay here, I don't bring you food or water, and tomorrow I come back and ask you if you want to move again. Rinse and repeat. That simple."

Wilbur feels irritated, with Dream and himself, as he shakily gets to his feet. "Go on, then," he mutters ruefully.

"Thank you, Wilbur," Dream gives him an approving nod. "Come on. Don't wander off."

Wilbur has to admit. He was curious to see what the rest of this place looked like. So far it's just a long, narrow tunnel illuminated by sea lanterns, water dripping from the ceiling occasionally. Wilbur tries to see over Dream's shoulder, slightly brighter light at the very end

of the corridor. Dream turns to the right. Wilbur hesitates. He could keep walking forward. Toward the light. He knows he won't get out. But he could just see where the light was coming from.

"Wilbur?"

Wilbur hesitates for another moment. He follows Dream down the corridor. There's an open door to his right, he glances in, seeing an empty room, nothing there besides the pipes to connect a sink.

"This way. That one isn't for you."

Wilbur keeps walking.

"This is an improvement, right?" Dream claps him on the shoulder, Wilbur does nothing to hide his disgust. The room is still stone brick, the floor still damp, but on raised wooden boards there is a bed, a sink in the corner for fresh water, and so on. Wilbur had never seen Tommy's cell back in the Vault, but this is an almost perfect copy, save for the raised platforms to give one a place to sit out of the damp. The ceiling is lower. Another measure against endermen, Wilbur supposes. It's also a reflection of the room he had just passed by.

"I'll bring you food, just wait here."

Dream leaves him alone. He leaves the door open behind him. Wilbur stares, the room silent save for the quiet *tick tick tick* of water dripping to the floor. He's unsupervised. He could walk out. He doesn't move. He doesn't even go to sit down, he just stands there, staring at the doorway, waiting for Dream to come back.

He does, Wilbur jumping in spite of himself when Dream turns the corner. He just gives Wilbur bread and a bowl with what looked like fish, pressing it into his hands, as if emphasizing that this time Wilbur gets to keep it, not waste it. Wilbur accepts. He steps back, hesitating before turning away from Dream, carefully placing the items on top of the bed.

"You stayed, Wilbur."

Wilbur resolutely ignores him.

"Tommy didn't. Did you know that? He went where he wasn't supposed to. Until I taught him, at least."

Wilbur still fights to ignore it, even as rage boils in his chest. What's he waiting for? He could attack Dream right now.

Yeah, with what? A bowl of fish?

Waiting is better. He still hates it.

"I know this room is small, but if you play your cards right, maybe I'll put you both somewhere bigger. You'd have to really earn it, though. To be together."

Wilbur freezes. Something stirring in the back of his mind. Dream's excitement, his promise of a good day, him rewarding Wilbur like he's trying to calm him, the room next door. Dream's demeanor reminds Wilbur of something. It reminds him of Phil getting the house ready for when Techno came to stay.

The cell next door isn't finished. It's empty.

That doesn't mean anything, though.

"Dream?" Wilbur's voice is weak, shaky.

"Yeah?"

Wilbur turns around to face him, hands visibly trembling. "Can you be honest with me?" He stares, like somehow his eyes can tear Dream apart.

"Sure, Wilbur," Dream humors him, seemingly amused.

"Where's Tommy?"

Dream laughs, arms folded over his chest as he considers the question. "Right now? Probably cowering somewhere in the Greater SMP, or New L'Manberg. Something like that." A pause. "But that's not really what you're asking, is it?"

Wilbur doesn't reply, just watches him.

"Right now he's in the Mainlands," Dream chuckles, low and cruel. "Tomorrow, however..."

The cell is small. Wilbur can get close to Dream in two strides. He slams Dream's skull back against the wall, but the helmet keeps him from doing anything more than throwing him off. Wilbur throws himself at Dream, body checking him into the wall, teeth bared and eyes darkened by fury. Wilbur is not just a living corpse, he's a vengeful revenant, grabbing Dream's right hand as it reaches for a weapon and instead twisting it around Dream's back. He just needs to get Dream on the ground, once he's on the ground, Wilbur can kill him—

Dream beats him to the punch, kicking Wilbur's knee so it buckles, but Wilbur holds on to him like a vice, dragging him down into the grimy water covering the ground. Wilbur still holds onto Dream's arm, twisting it, trying to break it. Dream's free hand tries to reach around to the sword kept on his right side. Wilbur steps on his hand. Dream screams as his left knuckles crunch horribly. Wilbur is distracted by this enough that Dream's right hand comes free, punching him right in the jaw. Dream keeps him pinned to the ground now, hands wrapped around his throat. Wilbur struggles to reach him, to push him off.

"Y-You fucked up, Wilbur—"

Before he could continue, Wilbur reaches up, between Dream's mask and helmet, just barely brushing against his forehead. Not enough to do any damage. So he grabs onto what of Dream's hair he could reach and tugs as hard as he can.

“Fuck—” Dream flinches just enough that Wilbur can wriggle free, kneeing Dream in the gut as hard as he can. It gets Dream off of him. Wilbur does not panic or run for the door. He isn’t doing this to escape. He’s doing it to kill Dream. It’s a desperate struggle, Wilbur doing everything he can to stop Dream from getting to his sword. Dream elbows him in the face and Wilbur feels his nose break and blood burst down his face. He still doesn’t stop, clawing at Dream’s throat, trying to strangle the only unarmored part of him. This is not a fight for witty retorts or well planned attacks, this is a vicious scuffle in the dirt where Wilbur only wishes he had a rock to bash Dream's fucking face in. He pulls Dream up and slams him back against the stone, Dream reaches for his sword again, Wilbur pins his arm to the floor with his leg. Wilbur weighs nothing now, but his weak muscles put all of their energy into simply keeping Dream down even as he struggles underneath him. Dream can’t move. Wilbur just keeps holding tighter, all of his rage and retribution and pure fucking terror for his little brother channeled into pulling the life from Dream’s lungs.

Wilbur feels a splitting pain in the back of his head. Then he feels nothing.

Chapter End Notes

this was a long one lol. I am having too much fun.

Hope it was worth the wait! And as always, feedback is cherished <3

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

CW: violence. And a little ableism. ya know.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tommy watches the horizon turn from black to purple to orange to blue. He feels like he should be grateful he gets to see another sunrise, but he knows the cost now. *Fair game.*

Tommy is not merely being extorted, blackmailed, stalked, and threatened. Now he's being hunted.

“Tommy?”

Tommy doesn't hear him at first, staring out the barred window as the sun rises. He hadn't gone back to sleep. None of them had, instead sitting in an eerie silence. Tommy feels a gentle hand touch his arm and flinches back, looking around wildly before managing to meet Tubbo's worried gaze.

“What?!” Tommy shoves his hair out of his face, it sticking to his forehead, clammy and sweaty with nerves.

“Take a deep breath, bossman,” Tubbo reaches out as if to put a hand on his shoulder before stopping himself.

Tommy doesn't need distance right now. He needs anything that might hold him together.

Like telling Tubbo what's happening to you.

Yeah. Then he won't let you leave. At the fucking best, you catch Dream and you never see Wilbur again. Tubbo needs to follow you. So he needs to let you go first.

Tommy cannot forget that tiny bit of hope hidden and kept close. Tubbo *will* find him. Maybe making his peace with all of this feels easier than hoping, but Tommy wants to believe he's not beyond saving so badly.

“Let's get up, alright? We're okay,” Tubbo is still trying to soothe him, offering him a hand off the ground. “I'll stay with you.”

Tommy doesn't want that— or rather, he does, but he can't— and he thinks Tubbo knows that. That's why he holds onto his hand so tightly as he pulls him to his feet.

“We should... we should get breakfast. Right?” Ranboo asks uncertainly.

Nothing had actually happened the night before, not really, but they're all acting as if they've survived an ordeal. Tommy knows his ordeal has barely begun.

"Yeah. We should— We should get out of here for a bit. Why don't we go to New L'Manberg?" Tubbo offers.

"Yeah, yeah I bet I have something we could eat back at my place," Ranboo nods quickly.

"Tommy?"

"Yeah. That's fine."

They approach new L'Manberg and Tubbo keeps on glancing over as if to make sure Tommy is still behind him. Tommy doesn't speak. He doesn't know what's left to say, so he just looks around instead. It's too beautiful out today. The sun filtered by the occasional cloud, just enough wind that the grass stirs like waves on the ocean. Sapnap, Punz, Sam, and Ponk have stopped to talk along the side of the prime path. Greetings are exchanged, but the three of them keep walking. None of them feel like stopping to chat about patrols or sightings of the monster that had been haunting them with particular ferocity since the night before. This wasn't *bad* exactly. Tommy doesn't know what to do with things not being bad.

Tommy didn't feel like this day belonged to him. Whatever peace had struggled to exist here as they walked around L'Manberg, as Tommy pretended he wasn't being hunted, it died with a scream.

"*Ponk!*"

Tommy turns around sharply to where Sam had cried. He sees him lunge forward and cover Ponk's body with his own, wrapping himself around them like a shield. Sapnap has his sword out. He's already running in the direction of the shot, toward the tunnel in the direction of the community house.

Tommy's heart immediately begins to race. This is the beginning of something he wants no part of. Tubbo has his axe, he steps in front of Tommy immediately, putting a hand out across him like that will better protect him. Ranboo runs across the hill to where Sam is now coming to meet them, holding Ponk close to his chest. Tommy can see the blood from here.

"Help! A health pot, anything! They— They need help," Sam's usual composure has sharply turned to anguish. Ponk is so still in his arms.

"Come on— let's go back to my house I have something—" Ranboo quickly ushers them in.
"Tubbo, Tommy—"

"He's—" Tubbo stares toward the horizon, knowing Dream must be just beyond it.

"Y-You should— You want to go after him. You should go with Sapnap. He'll— He'll keep you safe," Tommy nods, a strange numbness spreading through his chest.

"No," Tubbo says sharply.

“Tubbo—“

“*No!*” Tubbo shouts at him, a hand held tightly to his shoulder. There’s a desperate conviction behind his eyes. “I am *not* leaving you alone!”

Tommy stares at him, mouth hanging open slightly. He must have realized. Tubbo knows too much. Tommy doesn’t know how he’s meant to escape his best friend. Tubbo had been weighted with dread that Tommy was going to kill himself. He wasn’t wrong.

“Tubbo, go. You should help Sapnap. I’ll stay here, okay? We’ll be with the others too,” Punz of all people interrupts.

Tubbo hesitates, glancing between them, looking like he could almost cry. He doesn’t. “Tommy... you can’t...” No longer certain, no longer a promise, Tubbo is *asking* him to stay.

“It’s okay, Tubs. If you go, if you catch him, all of this is over,” Tommy hesitates for another moment. He wants to hug Tubbo. He’s too scared that will feel too much like saying goodbye, that that will make Tubbo stay. “I need you to end it. You’ve saved me before and I know you can do it again. Please. If you stop him now— I won’t have to be scared anymore.”

“I’ll stay with him, Tubbo. I swear,” Punz promises.

Tubbo frantically tries to read Tommy’s face for a lie. “I’ll finish this, Tommy. And then I’ll come home to you and we’ll— We’ll be okay, yeah?”

Tommy nods.

“We should get somewhere safe. And I want to check on Ponk, come on,” Punz looks back toward Ranboo’s house.

Tubbo and Tommy share one last glance, one last desperate promise, no goodbyes or *I love you*’s or anything they can put their faith behind, but that look still means something. Something different for each of them. It will be a promise broken for both either way. They turn their separate ways.

Tommy follows Punz into the crowded little house. Sam has laid Ponk on Ranboo’s table. He rarely lived here anyway, the blood hardly seemed to matter now. Tommy stops, frozen in the doorway at the sight of Ponk struggling to breathe with an arrow in their chest, Sam pressing down tightly around the wound to staunch the blood as Ranboo desperately searches his cupboards for a health potion.

“Oh god- shoot, no no no, I don’t—“ Ranboo sounds utterly frantic. “H-Hold on, hang in there, Ponk let me— Phil has to have—“ Ranboo all but runs out of the house, letting himself into the one next door.

Tommy watches the proceedings with a detached sort of horror.

“It’s gonna be okay...” Sam’s voice trembles as blood continues to well up around his hands. “J-Just look at me, Ponkie, we’re gonna get you fixed up. It’s okay. It’s— oh *god*—“

Sam sounds like he's fighting back sobs. Tommy can only remember one other instance of almost seeing Sam cry. It was just after Sam had offered him sanctuary in exile.

Ponk cannot speak, too focused on trying to get enough air, Tommy knows how difficult that can be when blood begins to fill up a lung. Just audible under Sam's terrified words is the horrible, bubbling, drowned inhales of blood as Ponk struggles. Ponk still reaches out a hand, soft brown eyes not afraid, just worried, brushing against Sam's cheek, a silent promise, *it's okay. It's going to be okay.*

"H-He did this because of *me*," Sam chokes out. "He did this to punish me— I wasn't his Warden, he— oh my god, Ponkie I am so sorry, I'm so sorry—"

Tommy hates himself for the selfish thought that crawls to light— *You know that's the same for you and Wil. You should get a move on.*

So Tommy flees.

Tommy stumbles out of Ranboo's house and desperately searches for a direction to run to. Tubbo and the others had pursued Dream toward the community house. So Tommy heads for the docks. Tubbo's docks. Tommy makes it over the hill without falling on his face, clinging to his cane for support, he steps onto the wood of the dock and keeps walking. Until there's nowhere left to walk to. Tommy fights to catch his breath, staring down at his reflection distorted by the water, rippling and alive. Tommy feels almost detached from his own body, the sound of his frantic, wheezing inhales the problem of someone else, he can just stare at the water.

At the shadow of a figure standing behind him.

~

Sapnap had seen the arrow enter Ponk's chest, heard Sam's scream, watched as he tried to protect them from any more shots. It had felt easy— *too* easy— to turn away from his friends toward a white mask disappearing into the tunnel and take off running. Sapnap's netherite boots ring sharply against the wood as he swerves around the corner into the tunnel just in time to see his best friend disappear around the opposite end.

"*Dream!*" Sapnap shouts his name, sprinting forward after him. He bursts out of the tunnel and looks around wildly, spotting Dream running down the prime path away from him. He persists.

Dream is heading toward the community house.

Sapnap fumbles for his crossbow. He only has one shot. The time it takes to reload— He won't have the chance to fire again. Dream glances over his shoulder to see a crossbow leveling with his head.

"*Wait, Sapnap, please don't!*" Dream stumbles back, a hand raised, terror in his voice as one of his best friends bears down on him.

Sapnap had already pulled the trigger. Looking back, as he will spend the rest of his life reliving this moment, haunted by it, he will never know if it was a conscious choice, if he got panicked and moved too quickly, or if Dream's words effected him for just a moment, either way, Sapnap shifts the crossbow an inch to the left just as he fires and the bolt embeds itself in the brick. Dream is already gone.

"Fuck—" Sapnap runs after him, but he already knows he's lost. Those few seconds were all Dream needed. "Dream!" Sapnap screams his name into an empty and unforgiving community house, turning in all directions, but he's at a loss. There's nothing left he can do. He'd missed his one shot. Dream is gone.

~

Tommy screams, turning around sharply. He feels his foot slip off the dock. He begins to fall.

"Whoa, there, Tommy," Punz grabs onto his wrist at the last second, for a moment he's the only thing keeping Tommy out of the water. He pulls him back onto stable ground. "What're you doing over here?"

Tommy stammers wordlessly for a moment. He's been bordering on a panic attack all day and Punz almost pushed him over the edge. *It's not Dream. It's not. You're still okay. Sort of.*

"M-Me— what the fuck are you doing out here?" Tommy says shakily.

"I'm supposed to take care of you right now," Punz looks almost irritated by his chore, glancing back over his shoulder to see if anyone else is coming up over the hill.

"I'm fine, Punz, he went— Dream went the other way, it's okay. You should just go— go protect the others," Tommy tries feebly. He's not exactly convincing. He has a feeling Punz won't let him go that easily.

Punz frowns, and then clarifies. "Tommy, I'm supposed to *take care of you* right now."

"What?" Tommy stares at him, uncomprehending. Punz gives him a knowing look, like Tommy is doing this on purpose. Tommy glances down. Punz has his crossbow out. He hasn't stopped holding onto Tommy's wrist. Tommy feels his stomach fill up with concrete. "Oh."

Punz lets go. "You're allowed to run," he sighs, resting his crossbow on his shoulder, clearly not concerned about Tommy being a flight risk off the end of a dock. "Dream said so. But I can shoot you too. Or not. I could let you run, if you want. But if I don't, Dream is gonna hurt Wilbur, obviously." He says it so casually, listing off these choices like they're superficial, meaningless. To be fair, they *are* meaningless.

"R-Right," Tommy stares at the wooden boards between them, eyes wide and almost glassy. He sways on his feet.

“Tommy?” Punz waves in front of his face. “Come on, then. If you’re not running, let’s go. I really don’t wanna have to carry you out of here.”

Tommy glances up, giving a small nod. He walks forward and his limbs don’t feel like his own. Punz’s presence beside him, walking as casually as he had on every patrol he’d taken in the hunt for Dream, it feels like an insult. Tommy is too weary for outrage.

“Where are we going?” Tommy asks as they crest the hillside back into New L’Manberg. Tommy fleetingly has the thought that Punz doesn’t have a hand on him, he’s not even making Tommy walk in front. Not like Tommy is trying to get away anyway. Every step he takes forward of his own volition feels like it might as well be another step of climbing a tower to jump off.

“Does it matter?” Punz doesn’t look at him, other than a glance to make sure he’s not about to bolt. “Walk with a little more urgency, will you? You’re supposed to still think you’re being hunted.”

“I *am* still being fuckin’ hunted...”

“Well, not if you’ve already been caught.”

Tommy feels like he might be sick. “Yeah. Guess so.”

He makes the mistake of looking to the left. To Ranboo’s house. Through the window he can see a tall figure in a suit bent over the dining table.

He hopes Ponk will be okay.

What was the last thing he said to Ranboo?

Tommy can’t remember.

He can’t remember.

For a moment, Tommy stops. They’ve reached the edge of the border of L’Manberg. Tommy looks back toward Ranboo’s house.

“Is this you... resisting?” Punz has the audacity to sound bored.

Tommy shakes his head. He follows Punz up the stairs and through the tunnel. They’re going toward his home.

“We’re not going to my house, are we?”

“No, keep walking.”

Tommy does. He doesn’t know if he should just keep staring at the prime path or if he should take this last look while he still can.

“Over here.” Punz nods in the direction of the prime path leading toward the white mansion on the beach. The complete opposite direction to where Dream had been seen fleeing.

“Hey! Guys– Did you hear Dream was spotted– Well, I guess obviously that’s probably why you’re over here– hiding out on the other end of the server.”

Tommy looks over sharply, startled, as Connor stares back at him, expression earnest and a bit antsy as he jogs to catch up to them.

Connor looks between them. “Yeah, you *look* pretty freaked, Tommy. Which– Fair. Where are you going? I kinda want to come hide out with you guys if that’s okay. It sounds like Dream is getting revenge on people who let him down– he took a shot at Sam, didn’t he? Hit Ponk instead? Funny, I remember his aim being better. And, well,” Connor rolls back his shoulders, tone taking on a weak mimicry of humility, “I snitched on seeing him, so. Might end up with a target on my back.”

“I’m sure you’re fine, Connor,” Punz says dryly.

“I guess we’ll see,” Connor keeps walking beside them.

“If you’re so worried about becoming a target, why are you walking next to the biggest target on the server?” Punz nods to Tommy.

Connor looks at Tommy, almost surprised, like he hadn’t considered that. “Oh! Well. I dunno. I’m here now! And you’ve always been pretty badass, haven’t you, Punz?”

“I’m not here to babysit you,” Punz turns cold. “I’m here to protect Tommy.”

Tommy can’t hold back a sharp, barking laugh. He covers his mouth right after, glancing from Punz to Connor with something almost frantic. Punz gives him a warning look before turning back to Connor.

“I am not going to be responsible for you. You should go. Come on, Tommy,” Punz walks forward more quickly, putting a hand on Tommy’s shoulder and steering him further down the prime path, Tommy struggling to keep up even with his cane.

“Slow down there,” Connor keeps pace. “Tommy, you doing okay? Deep breaths. We’ve got Punz here and I’ll stay with you too.” It’s awful. Connor’s compassion is so starkly genuine.

Tommy feels like he’s burying a scream. He could ask for help. Right now he could tell Connor to run, to save him, even just with a look, Tommy could try to give some indication that something is wrong.

“M-Maybe you should go, Connor,” Tommy says hoarsely. He doesn’t look over at him, only staring ahead. He lets Punz continue to steer him further toward the shore, stumbling as Punz all but pulls him off the prime path.

“Whoa, whoa careful, man,” Connor reaches out a hand to stop Tommy from falling. Connor gives Punz a disapproving look.

“Sorry if I have a sense of urgency right now,” Punz says irritably. Tommy looks up, the prison looming ahead, sharp panic rises up in his chest.

Connor can see Tommy’s expression go from worried to worse. He stops directly in front of them, blocking the path forward. He looks between Punz and Tommy warily, some dark understanding growing behind his eyes.

“...are you *sure* you’re okay, Tommy?” Connor asks carefully.

“He’s fine,” Punz says curtly, he lets go of Tommy’s shoulder, and puts a hand on the hilt of his sword.

Connor gives Punz an unimpressed look. “I was *asking* Tommy.”

“Connor–” Tommy doesn’t even know what he’s going to say.

“Get out of the way,” Punz cuts him off.

Connor laughs, sizing Punz up like he isn’t the one unarmed and without armor. “*No.*”

He steps forward, extending an arm like he’s about to put Tommy behind him, standing between him and Punz, but he never gets that chance.

Dream exits the portal building on the outskirts of the prison. All three of them see him appear out of the corner of their eyes, a white mask, an axe swinging lazily at his side. For a moment, everything is frozen, no one says a word. Dream approaches like an oncoming storm, walking at a steady, easy pace, silent clouds rolling in– then, thunder.

“*No!*” Tommy screams as Dream swings his axe into the side of Connor’s neck. Connor is thrown back by the swing, collapsing into the grass, body crumpled and head lolling at an unnatural angle, held off the ground only by the axe embedded there, as blood quickly stains his blue hood and pours onto the ground in a torrent of red. Tommy takes one step forward– Connor is so far beyond help or saving but he steps forward anyway– but Punz stops him with a firm hand on his shoulder.

“I thought you’d know better than to bring along company,” Dream looks at Punz almost scoldingly. He yanks his axe out of Connor with a hefty tug so Connor’s head hits the ground and the flow of blood begins in earnest, laying it over his shoulder.

“It’s Connor, what’d you expect?” Punz shrugs. He sighs. “They know I was with Tommy, so you’re gonna have to make sure it looks good.” Punz lets go of Tommy’s shoulder, shaking out the tension from his arms like he’s gearing up for something.

Dream grabs his crossbow, nodding. “Cool. I’m gonna go kinda far, okay?”

“Be careful. I’d rather not use a life on a package delivery,” Punz winces.

“Yeah, yeah, I know.” And with that, Dream shoots Punz in the leg.

“*Fuck*,” Punz’s leg collapses underneath him as he grimaces, inhaling sharply. “One more,” he says gruffly.

“You sure?”

Punz nods.

“Alright, your funeral,” Dream shrugs. “The axe this time?”

Punz gives him an exasperated look.

“I won’t go too deep, promise,” Dream says almost teasingly. “Or how about the sword?”

“Fine, fine. Make it quick. Connor has already despawned. He’ll go for help the moment he’s back from... wherever he sleeps,” Punz turns to the side.

“Look on the bright side,” Dream eyes Punz carefully, lining up his sword. “You’ll look like a hero.” He stabs Punz in his ribs.

Tommy merely watches on in stunned horror, a fleeting, terrible thought returning— *if this is how he treats his allies, what’s happened to Wilbur?*

Punz lays back on the ground, eyes closed and teeth gritted against the pain. “I’ll message them in a minute. I’d get a move on.”

“Got it, I’ll see you later. Come on, Tommy,” Dream nods Tommy over.

Tommy turns away from Punz’s now bleeding form to the pool of blood already on the grass. Connor’s body has despawned. Good. He still has at least one life left.

“*Tommy*,” Dream snaps. “Let’s go,” he nods again, this time in the direction of the prison.

“N-No,” Tommy stammers, looking back at Dream with wide eyes.

Dream turns back to look at him sharply, stepping closer “*No*? What the fuck do you mean *no*?”

“He... he was here... this whole time he was...” Tommy stares at the prison in awestruck horror.

Dream laughs. “*No*, don’t be stupid. If I could use the prison, why would I have shot Ponk? Come on, I’ll show you.” Dream grows more irritated, stepping closer so he and Tommy are face to face. “If you keep hesitating I will leave you here and take out my annoyance on Wilbur, got it? Feel free to stay, but *I’m* going.” He turns and heads back toward the portal.

Tommy pauses only for another moment. He follows him.

Dream glances back approvingly. “Do you have any idea how *stupid* it would be for me to keep you both right by the Mainlands when Sam can still get into the prison?” Dream laughs, “did you see the way Sam freaked out? He’s so possessive about Ponk, isn’t he? He’s been

waiting for me to do something like that. He should know better than to be so obvious about his favorites. Come on.” Tommy flinches as Dream grabs onto his arm as they step into the portal.

Tommy shuts his eyes as the world blurs into a purple haze. His ears pop from the dull hum of the portal, Dream pulling him through as the air grows warmer. Tommy opens his eyes to a small room of quartz and blackstone. Dream lets go of Tommy’s arm and walks forward. A narrow tunnel has been cut in the side of the room, revealing a layer of obsidian before emerging into a narrow tunnel in the netherrack.

Dream looks ahead before turning back to Tommy, giving him a patronizing once over. “You’re all *polished* now, aren’t you? New clothes, a haircut,” he scoffs. “I’ll take that,” he nods to the cane Tommy has been holding like a lifeline this whole time.

“I need it,” Tommy feels almost disconnected from his own words. He doesn’t know where he gets the courage.

“Oh, *no*. You don’t need anything except what I give you,” Dream extends a hand. Tommy still doesn’t move. Anxiety swirls in his stomach, but he still doesn’t move. Dream sighs, “look, Tommy, I won’t do anything you don’t agree to, but if you’re going to come with me, you’ll play by my rules. You can walk away right now, it’s your choice, or you can listen.”

Tommy stares at him, baffled by Dream’s continued insistence on his *choice* in all of this. He hands Dream the cane.

“Thank you, Tommy,” Dream says, self satisfied and smug. He breaks it in half before tossing it aside. “Okay, good. Now, at some point I am going to kill you to proceed. You can’t see where we’re going. So, if you’ll *allow* me,” Dream says it almost like a joke. “I’m going to kill you now.”

Tommy jumps when he feels his comm buzz.

<Punz> DREAM TOOK TOMMY

<Punz> BY THE PRISON

<Punz> hurry im bleeding

<Punz> he killed connor

<Punz> theyre gone fucking hurry

Tommy stares at the screen, horror dulled to misery.

“Oh, I’ll take that too, if you don’t mind,” Dream extends a hand.

Tommy silently gives up the comm. That was his last chance to ask for help. To at the very least warn them that Punz is a fucking liar and a snake.

“Ready?” Dream tries to pull him from his daze.

Tommy can't remember what the last thing he said to Tubbo had been.

"Tommy, are you ready?"

Tommy nods.

Dream snaps his neck.

Chapter End Notes

WHAT'S THIS? CONNOREATSPANTS WITH A STEEL CHAIR—

no never mind my guy is dead.

A for Effort Connor <3

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

no warnings i can think of other than usual c!Dream's bad energy ya know. and idk maybe punz doing some #gaslighting

OH and temporary character death, referenced injuries. a dude hauling a corpse across the countryside.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tubbo arrives to the community house moments after Sapnap.

“Dream!”

He hears Sapnap scream and tries to run a little faster, expecting to find Sapnap dead on the ground, but when he enters, Sapnap stands alone.

“Where is he? Sapnap, where is he?” Tubbo stops. He does not look out any of the neighboring doorways himself, he only looks at Sapnap and prays for a better answer. Sapnap gives him this terrible, guilt ridden look and Tubbo starts running. Back toward New L’Manberg.

“Ranboo!” Tubbo sees his minutes man exit his house haggard and weary, Sam pushing past him and starts running in the opposite direction, toward Ponk’s place, his expression not only one of just guilt but of loss.

“Sam!” Sapnap seems torn between following him and staying with these two.

“P-Ponk– I couldn’t– I couldn’t–” Ranboo doesn’t react when Tubbo grabs his arms.

“Ranboo– Where is he? He’s okay, right?”

“There was t-too much blood and I couldn’t– I tried but the health pot– I was too late, I w-was–” Ranboo’s eyes seem almost glassy. There’s blood on his hands too now.

“Ranboo!” Tubbo shouts in his face. *“Please. Where’s Tommy?”*

Ranboo seems to blink awake. “He w-was– He’s with Punz, isn’t he? Punz said he would– He said he would go look after him, I was– I’m sorry, Tubbo I was trying t-to save Ponk but I couldn’t–”

“It’s okay, Ranboo, where’s Punz, then?” Tubbo is growing more and more panicked.

Almost on cue, Punz's name glows to life on Tubbo's communicator.

<Punz> DREAM TOOK TOMMY

<Punz> BY THE PRISON

Tubbo is already sprinting toward the prime path, heart beating in his throat, flighty terror that makes him feel more inclined to cry than fight. He needs to be strong right now. It's hard when he's this fucking scared.

<Punz> hurry im bleidng

Sapnap and Ranboo race behind him.

<Punz> he killed connor

<Punz> theyre gone fucking hurry

"Punz!" Sapnap sprints to his friend's side, where Punz remains bleeding and dipping closer to unconsciousness.

Tubbo looks wildly around them, for anything, any sign.

"Which way did they go?!"

Punz struggles to focus on him, blood beginning to pool around him from an arrow wound in his leg and a nasty gash across his side. Sapnap helps him sit up.

"H-Here, I have—" Ranboo's hands shake as he passes Sapnap a health potion.

"Punz, where the fuck did they go?!" Tubbo almost grabs him, having just enough sense not to start to strangle someone already looking half dead.

"Th-That way," Punz points vaguely in the direction of the prison.

"Did they leave in a boat?" Sapnap scans the horizon.

"No, no it was... they might be in the prison? I dunno, they went in there," Punz nods to the portal room before shutting his eyes, gritting his teeth as every inhale tugs at the gaping hole in his side.

"I'm going," Tubbo heads for the portal.

"Tubbo! Wait—" Sapnap wants to go help him, but Punz isn't going to last much longer without help.

"I- I can help Punz, please go take care of him, keep him safe," Ranboo puts his arm around Punz, taking Sapnap's place so he can run after Tubbo.

Sapnap enters the portal room just as Tubbo disappears through it.

By the time Sapnap has joined him on the other side, in the tiny waystation between the prison and the outside world, he knows it's over. Sapnap feels like there's a stone weighing down his stomach as he sees Tubbo, frozen, two broken pieces of wood in his hands. Tommy's cane. Sapnap scans the room. They are alone. No visible indication of any way in or any way out.

"...Tubbo?" Sapnap says carefully.

For a moment Tubbo remains frozen, staring at the shards of wood like they may as well be Tommy's corpse. "I need... I need an Enderchest. I need one right now— Where—" Tubbo turns back toward the portal. His expression is no longer panicked, it is cold and empty.

Sapnap follows him, stopping as he sees Ranboo holding a very limp Punz.

"Is he...?"

"He's alive. Just passed out. Health pot stopped the bleeding," Ranboo says, exhausted and shaky.

"Good, yeah— fine," Sapnap pushes his hair back from his face with a heavy sigh. "We can't lose anyone else today."

"S-So he...?" Ranboo looks to him sharply, anguish only growing.

"I... He got away from me," Sapnap tries to sound steady. "Here— I can... I can carry him. You should go find Tubbo. He's going to need you."

Ranboo nods, looking ill, passing over his charge before running in the direction of Tubbo. Tubbo has scaled one of Bad's trident towers.

"What're you..?"

"Tommy— That fucking asshole— He planned this shit," Tubbo snaps as he climbs back down. "They're... they're still in the Nether," Tubbo stares at the compass, which spins aimlessly. "When I get him— I'm gonna fucking kill him and then I'll have Dream bring him back so can tell him off again." Tubbo has to be mad at Tommy. He has to hate him for doing this because he can't hate him if he's gone forever. Being angry with him means he's coming home. He has to be.

"Right— Right, the compass. We should get help," Ranboo nods, following Tubbo back down the primepath toward the main Nether portal.

"Yeah, but I'm not waiting. The longer we wait the further they get away."

"O-Oh," Ranboo says with wide eyes. "Let me— I have to tell people. We do need help, Tubbo." He pulls out his comm, typing furiously.

"Okay, keep them updated with coordinates, then," Tubbo enters the portal, Ranboo quickly following. "Do you have obsidian?"

“N-No?”

“Go get some and get some swiftness pots or pearls so you can catch up. The moment this thing stops working we’ve got to build a portal to get back to the overworld,” Tubbo turns around and starts off down the nether highway closest to the compass’s mark.

“Tubbo— You shouldn’t— You can’t go alone!” Ranboo is torn between his orders and keeping his friend safe.

“Send someone fucking after me, then!” Tubbo doesn’t stop his stride.

“You’re insane!” Ranboo shouts after him frustratedly before running back toward the portal. “Oh shoot oh shoot, come on— Come on, you gotta— You gotta find someone—” Ranboo was told to get obsidian. Right now his only goal is to find someone to keep Tubbo safe. “Phil! Oh thank god—” Ranboo sprints across the platforms of New L’Manberg and almost crashes into the smaller man.

“Whoa, there, mate, where you going in such a hurry?” Phil laughs.

“Dream has Tommy and Tubbo is going after him and I need stuff to make a portal so will you go keep him safe he’s in the Nether on the highway heading toward Techno’s place kind of and I’m kind of panicking—”

“Ranboo, take a deep breath,” Phil sobers immediately, putting a gentle hand on his arm, gravely serious. “I’ll message Techno too. He can meet Tubbo through the portal. Tell me what you need.”

“I need obsidian— at least enough for one portal, probably more— and something to light it. But mostly— If Tubbo goes after them alone I don’t know what— I don’t know—” Ranboo is finding it harder to speak coherently as it hits him much more harshly that he just let Tubbo go chasing after Dream *alone*.

Phil is already typing out on his comm. “Techno is on his way. Come on. I still have obsidian somewhere from when we took down the wall,” Phil returns to his house. “Are you hurt?”

“What?”

“Whose blood is that?” Phil asks, nodding to his hands.

“It’s—” Ranboo’s voice shakes. As far as he can remember, he’s never seen someone die before, let alone when he was frantically trying to give them a health potion. “It’s Ponk’s. They’re— They’re okay now, I think? I hope? Sam was gonna check their place to see if they respawned there. They had lives left.”

“So they..?” Phil pauses only for a moment, one look at Ranboo’s expression and he decides to hurry on. Techno and Tubbo won’t be able to do anything if they can’t get to the overworld.

“Ranboo! Where’s Tubbo?” Sapnap sees them enter Phil’s house and is quick to follow.

“He’s– He’s in the Nether, going after them– Where’s Punz?” Ranboo asks.

“He’s in your house. Hope it’s okay that I brought him there. Do you have any more health potions?” Sapnap asks. “Look, I can go after Tubbo and help him, but I can’t leave Punz alone. He’s stable, but I think he’s gonna need more help, man.”

Ranboo needs to follow Tubbo, but Sapnap is a more experienced fighter than him. He wants Sapnap to help Tubbo. He wants to go with them. Punz definitely needs help. Ranboo doesn’t have time to hesitate right now.

Phil can see the panic on his face. “I’ll stay with him. You two go, get a move on,” Phil gives Ranboo his obsidian and a flint and steel.

“Swiftness– Do you have any swiftness potions?” Ranboo asks.

“No, no I don’t. Best you just start running,” Phil says sympathetically. “I’ll look after Punz for you. Promise.”

Sapnap gives him a nod of thanks before he and Ranboo are running back toward the main portal. “I don’t have potions, but I do have enderpearls,” Sapnap offers them with some hesitation. “Wait, shit, sorry, that’s probably–”

Ranboo stares at them in distaste, wincing. “Well, we need them, don’t we?” He takes the five pearls Sapnap offers him, trying not to shudder. Whatever it takes to get to Tubbo faster.

“Hey, Tubbo!”

Tubbo turns his axe on Technoblade in an instant, jumping. He calms when a bemused pig stares back instead of that evil mask. “What’re you doing here?”

“Uh. Phil sent me. Said you and Ranboo needed help? Dream made a move, right?” Techno asks.

Tubbo nods and keeps moving, following the slow turn of the compass dial. Soon they’ll be off the highways and travel will get much harder. “He’s got Tommy.”

“He’s *got* Tommy? I thought someone was watchin’ him,” Techno matches his pace easily, one hand now going to his sword.

“Doesn’t matter right now,” Tubbo says shortly. “We planned for this– *Fuck!*” Tubbo shouts, voice sharp and piercing. The compass is no longer pointing, instead it spins aimlessly.

“What?!”

“They’re– Dream went through a portal, they’re back in the overworld and I can’t–”

“We’ve got it!” Ranboo shouts breathlessly from behind him as he runs to catch up, Sapnap not far behind. “I g-got... I got obsidian from Phil,” Ranboo assembles the portal with

frantic and shaky hands, the four of them piling through, the hum pressing in on Tubbo's ears until he can feel it in his chest.

They emerge in a spruce forest, Tubbo scanning the surroundings for some sign of Dream. He hadn't actually hoped that they'd somehow spawn close to them, what really matters is the compass has stopped spinning, instead, it points resolutely toward something shifting slightly off to the North East. Tubbo starts off almost at a run and the others follow without question or pause, Ranboo occasionally puts a gentle hand on Tubbo's shoulder to steer him as he barely misses hitting trees, all of his focus on the slightest of turns to the needle.

Sapnap sharply puts out a hand to stop Tubbo, almost making him stumble. Tubbo turns to snap at him, but just a glimpse of Sapnap's gaze makes him freeze. Everyone else has gone silent, trusting their resident Dream hunter. Sapnap reaches for his crossbow. Tubbo follows his eyes, hope and dread so easily found together.

~

"Where the hell am I..?" Punz says weakly as he regains consciousness.

"Hi, mate. Welcome back," Phil offers him a hand to help him sit up. "You're in New L'Manberg. You're okay. Well, you'll make a full recovery at least."

"Where are the others? Dream? Connor? Tommy?" Punz asks, a hand pressed to his now bandaged side.

"That shouldn't be your focus right now," Phil says not unkindly. "Don't worry, the others are gonna hunt down Dream. I don't know where Connor is, I'm afraid, but I can message him for you, see if he's okay?"

"No, no you don't need to do that," Punz says quickly.

"It's no trouble, really. I'd like to ask him a few questions myself," Phil admits.

"Yeah, me too," Punz mutters. "Y'know, he tried to stop me from getting Tommy somewhere safe. Did you know that? He cut us off, slowed us down, and then all the sudden Dream was there, cutting into me..."

"Really?" Phil looks surprised. "Shit."

"I couldn't... I tried to stop him but first I couldn't stand and then he... I think he tried to kill me too," Punz frowns, like he's trying to draw up a hazy memory.

Phil puts a steady, comforting hand on his shoulder. "You did what you could, Punz. No one will blame you for that."

Punz smiles weakly. "Thank you, Phil. Just... Wish I could've stopped him."

Phil glances down at his communicator.

<Connoreatspants> yeah I can come

<Connoreatspants> Punz was acting shady af tho

<Connoreatspants> or just mean.

Phil sighs. “Well, Connor is gonna come here. Maybe he’ll offer an apology for getting in the way?”

Punz looks grave. “I hope that’s all it was.”

“What’s that, mate?”

Punz glances over to him worriedly. “Connor stopped me right by the prison portal, and then Dream walked through.”

“But... Dream *killed* Connor, didn’t he?” Phil frowns.

“Yeah. Dream doesn’t seem like the type to take good care of his allies, does he?” Punz smirks dryly, like he’s remembering something in particular.

Phil is more distracted by the subject at hand. “So, Connor. The guy in the... sonic onesie, you think *he* is working with Dream?” He asks doubtfully.

Punz shrugs before hissing in pain as it tugs at the wound on his ribs. “I hope not. It was nice to at least know everyone was on the same side.”

“Yeah, it was. Who knows, maybe it’ll stay that way.”

As if on cue, Connor comes barging into the house, haggard and almost disoriented, one hand still pressed to the raised and harsh scar across his neck.

“Well, that sucked.”

~

Dream was having a relatively easy journey. Hauling a corpse was irritating, but he preferred it to Tommy knowing where he was, or the kid panicking and trying to run. He keeps Tommy thrown over his shoulder, the weight making his gait uneven, but it’s not much farther now to the boat, and then he can just dump Tommy on the ground while he rows. Dream had been checking his surroundings more on instinct than anything. He’d sealed up the tunnel entirely behind him and had avoided the Nether highways, the portal he’d used was hidden, and by now he’s at least a few thousand blocks from spawn. So maybe he got lazy. Maybe he didn’t look back often enough.

Because Dream collapses forward, a bolt sticking out of his left shoulder. Dream keeps his footing and doesn’t look back, he just starts running. Suddenly Tommy’s body feels a lot heavier, the ground far more uneven, and the voices behind him closer. Another bolt hits a tree trunk on his left side, the side with his already bloody shoulder.

Oh. They’re trying not to hit Tommy. Ha.

Dream grabs Tommy's limp arm and pulls it over his wounded shoulder, not caring as the bones of a dead boy are bent and cracked out of shape. Tommy is even more of a nuisance to carry now, but these idiots are so worried about shooting a fucking *corpse* they hopefully won't risk the crossbow again.

Dream turns sharply. He cannot go straight to the beaches. He has to lose them first.

"*Dream! Stop!*" Sapnap's cracked and frustrated voice reaches him.

Dream has a feeling his *wait, Sapnap, please don't!* trick won't work twice. Dream sees a ridge out of the corner of his eye. A ravine. What're the odds he can make the jump with dead weight on his back and the people chasing him won't? Slim.

Slim without a little help.

Dream had set out on this mission with a few essentials. The basics to hurt Ponk— crossbow, poisoned arrows— and some things more just in case: invis potions, tnt.

This was definitely the moment for *just in case*.

Dream holds Tommy steady with one hand, the other reaching in his inventory.

"He's gonna try to jump," Techno spots the ravine before the rest of them.

"Don't stop," Tubbo says shortly. Tubbo is no longer watching the compass, he only stares at the figure still running ahead of him, specifically at the broken body being dragged along with him. He wishes it were only fury at the sight of Dream stealing away with Tommy's corpse and not the taste of bile in the back of his throat. Dream makes the jump. Tubbo doesn't slow down. He starts to launch himself off the edge of the ravine, he can make it to the other side, if Dream can make it he can too—

Instead, Tubbo chokes as the collar of his shirt is yanked back forcefully, he hits the ground as an explosion rattles the air, leaving him disoriented and furious.

"Why the fuck did you stop me?!" Tubbo shouts at Technoblade.

"Uh. Maybe so you wouldn't get blown up?" Techno says dryly.

"Don't fucking stop!" Tubbo snarls. He runs along the edge of the ravine, Dream having destroyed the narrower part that was an easy jump.

They've lost sight of him. Okay, okay not the end of the world, they'll just follow the compass. That does little to stop the panic growing louder in his chest. Dream had slipped away. Tubbo had had Tommy in his fucking sights and now he's stuck running alongside a cliff trying to find a fucking way across. The compass feels warm in his sweaty hand. Tubbo is putting a part of himself underneath the smooth pane of glass, like he can feel the needle's magnetic pull tugging on his heart. He can find Tommy. He can bring him home. He just needs to follow the compass.

"Technoblade, help me," Tubbo backs away from the edge, nodding to it.

“Heh?”

“Kneel down and let me launch off your back. Come on, are you a super strong warrior or not?” Tubbo snaps.

“Tubbo, we can’t send you over alone—” Ranboo looks more worried. “Sapnap— do you have any more enderpearls?”

“No, no sorry, dude, I just had those ones,” Sapnap shrugs.

“Oh, fuck this,” Tubbo snaps. Tubbo doesn’t have any blocks on him. He hadn’t exactly planned on such an expedition when he woke up this morning. He *does* have a pickaxe.

If he slips, he can still land this. All that matters is getting to the other side.

“Tubbo, wait—!” Ranboo reaches out to stop him but by then it’s too late.

~

“Connor. You doing alright?” Phil eyes him warily.

“Not *especially*,” Connor sighs loudly. “Just took an axe to the neck,” he sits down heavily on top of one of the chests. He spots Punz. “Yo, what happened to *you*?”

Punz gives him a sharp look. “I got shot. And stabbed. Because *someone* got in my way when I was trying to find a safehouse.”

“Hey, man, *you* were the one pushing Tommy around,” Connor shoots back. “That was not cool.”

“Yeah, I was *trying to get him somewhere safe*,” Punz snaps. “Maybe I was too harsh with him, I just— I was—” his voice tremors for a moment. “I thought I could just get him somewhere safe.”

Connor immediately softens. “Punz, I’ve never seen this side of you before. Cool to know you care,” Connor nods sagely.

Punz glares at him. “I just don’t like screwing up a job.”

Connor grins cheekily. “Sure thing, tough guy. You don’t care at all!”

Punz manages a weak smirk.

It’s an easy act. If Connor isn’t suspicious, then no one is.

~

Tubbo is right. He couldn’t make the jump. Tubbo lands pickaxe first against the wall, lodging the end of the pick into the stone. Tubbo pauses only for a moment, breathing hard, shocked at his own luck that he didn’t plummet to his death. It’s not over yet. Tubbo’s free

hand clings to the rocks, the other yanking the pick free and digging it into the earth just over the edge of the cliff. He manages to pull himself up, turning to see his three companions watching him in awe and horror.

“Jump. Or don’t,” Tubbo pants, readjusting his chestplate. “I’m going.”

“T-Tubbo!” Ranboo sounds frantic.

Tubbo ignores their voices, running ahead, resolutely following the compass like a lifeline. Tubbo hears a thud, glancing back to see Sapnap has managed to make the jump, it looking like Technoblade had given him a boost. Ranboo joins soon after, his seven foot tall height giving him just enough advantage. Technoblade follows, Tubbo pauses long enough to see the old warrior drink a potion before making the jump.

Tubbo feels like he should thank them. He’s being unreasonable and hard to follow, but they stay by his side anyway. “Keep up.” He takes off running again. He refuses to get tired until Tommy is home. With the compass, and the lack of literal deadweight on all of their backs, they begin to catch back up in minutes. Tubbo has never been more relieved to once again spot Tommy’s corpse in his enemy’s arms. Until suddenly they aren’t there anymore.

Dream had assumed he wouldn’t be followed, but he isn’t stupid. They managed to get a shot at him for a reason— He isn’t wearing armor. Dream can hear four armored sets of boots thundering after him. He knew the ravine wouldn’t stop them indefinitely, but it’s something. He takes his headstart to smash a bottle on the ground, dousing both himself and Tommy’s corpse in an invis potion.

“Where’d he go?!” Ranboo grows more panicked as the figure disappears.

“Fuck fuck fuck fuck—” Tubbo scrambles for the compass again, not saying another word as he keeps running after the needle blindly.

“Tubbo, if we can’t *see* him—”

“It doesn’t fucking matter, keep going!” Tubbo screams at them, staring down at the needle, turning sharply as the needle spins back and forth as Dream tries to shake them off. Tubbo has already felt like he was losing his fucking mind today and it only worsens from the deranged fucking rat race Dream was putting him through— that *Tommy* was putting him through— but Tubbo just keeps going, barely noticing Ranboo panickedly pulling him out of the way of trees and divots in the earth.

Dream is *so* fucking confused right now. He can still *hear* them all, shouting and running in a panic maybe a dozen meters behind him. He changes the directions and somehow they fucking follow. He’s invisible, but they’re still pursuing him as resolutely as if he were a beacon. Dream can’t just keep running, especially not with it feeling like Tommy is getting heavier and heavier on his back. He needs to find somewhere to *hide*.

If Tommy were a bit less dead, he’d probably point out the irony— now it’s Dream’s turn to be torn between running and hiding as he’s hunted.

Dream is being tracked. He knows he is as even invisible and changing direction constantly, he still hears his pursuers. He just has no idea how. The forms of tracking he *does* know have certain caveats— they cannot track through portals. So if he can make it back to his portal, that should at least buy him some time. Fuck, he's got to be fast. He also has no idea how much time he has left on this invis potion.

Dream makes a sharp turn before doubling back. His pursuers don't even pause. He's *definitely* being fucking tracked. And he has a feeling said tracker is currently hanging over his shoulder. Tommy always finds a way to cause problems for him, dead or alive.

The compass starts spinning.

"He— He went through a portal," Tubbo frowns, paused and aimless without the needle to follow.

"Yeah, look, he doubled back. Our portal isn't far," Sapnap nods ahead through the trees. "Come on, we don't want him getting too far ahead of us."

By the time they get through the portal, the compass points one way for maybe a moment and then starts spinning again.

"He— he went back through," Tubbo says exasperatedly.

"He's caught on somewhat, then, hasn't he?" Technoblade says dryly.

Tubbo frowns, brows furrowed together. "We pick a side. If we know the general direction, while he's dicking around with portals we can close in on him."

"Well, unless he's building more portals and still moving," Ranboo points out.

Tubbo feels frozen in his panic. This is why he isn't allowed to feel. If he's feeling it means he's not thinking and he needs to fucking *think* until he finds a solution.

"Either way, we still end up with a direction to go in. We stay in the overworld," Tubbo goes back through and when he rematerializes to a compass spinning yet again, he does his best not to cry at the sick frustration of it all.

~

"It'll be okay. They'll find him and bring him home," Phil nods resolutely.

"Have you heard from the others?" Punz asks.

"No, nothing yet," Phil says, checking his communicator.

"How'd they follow him?" Connor asks.

"Well," Phil frowns, a sinister realization hitting him. "At the time I thought it was just 'cause Tommy was— of course— a little paranoid, but now I'm starting to wonder if the poor

kid had been planning on this happening from the start,” Phil sighs. “How are you hanging in there, Punz? Do you want another health pot, maybe?”

“No, I’m doing better now– What makes you say that, Phil?” Punz’s focus is now entirely on him.

“Tommy had me help him make a lodestone. A *tiny* one,” Phil holds his fingers about an inch apart. “Never made or even seen anything like it, but it was clever. Normally, y’know, you gotta place down a big heavy block, but we got it down to the size of maybe your standard cut emerald.”

“Wait– Wait, so Tommy has something on him now that we can track?” Punz asks more forcefully.

“Well, not *us*. But Tubbo has it. So don’t worry about it, Punz. You did what you could, and they’ll bring him home,” Phil says in that reassuring way of his.

“What if it stops working?” Connor looks intrigued.

“Stops working?” Phil gives him a curious look.

“Like, if Dream breaks it or something.”

“Well, hopefully Tommy had the brains to hide it somewhere. We talked about it for a bit, putting it in his shoe or his mouth or something of the like,” Phil says carefully.

“Wait– Where’s Ponk?” Punz sits up sharply. “I thought you brought them here to take care of them too.”

Phil winces. “They, uh. They didn’t make it. But they still have got two lives left. I think Sam went to go take care of them.”

“Oh,” Punz wilts. “I need– I need to message them, see if they’re okay,” Punz grabs his communicator. The other company do not see him type out his messages. One of which goes to Ponk, asking if they’re alright.

“I feel like Dream would probably think to search Tommy for like, weapons or whatever. How do you all know he hasn’t found it?” Connor is still obsessing over the details.

“Christ, Connor, I don’t know!” Phil says exasperatedly. “Guess we just hope.”

“Fair enough,” Connor shrugs. “Interesting stuff, though.” He fidgets restlessly. “Did Ponk answer?” He asks Punz.

“What? No, not yet,” Punz says. “You should ask Sam if he’s got them.”

“Yeah, good idea,” Connor nods, typing out on his own comm.

Punz watches him closely. Okay. Good. They’ve both performed the same actions. Neither of them are any more suspicious than the other. And Phil seems more preoccupied with his

worry than with the two of them.

~

Dream is getting motion sickness from going back and forth through the portal, but until he figures out what's happening, he cannot stay in one plane for long. The invis potion has worn off, but he doesn't see the point in another one when apparently they can follow him either way. He's on the Nether side when his comm buzzes.

Punz whispers to you: Tommy has got a lodestone on him. They've been following you with that. It's small. Check shoes and mouth.

"What the fuck?" Dream says to no one but the corpse he's dropped to the ground. "Tommy, you are such a fucking nuisance, d'you know that?" Dream sighs, getting down on his knees and cracking open Tommy's already stiff jaw. Tommy's eyes aren't quite open, just enough that Dream can see white as Dream breaks open his mouth like an old chest. Nothing. "You seem like the type to hide shit in your shoes." Tommy doesn't reply as Dream carefully loosens his shoe laces and pries them off. "Not there either," Dream sighs irritably, tossing aside Tommy's sneakers. "Guess I could always burn up your corpse, fish it out of your skeleton, and bring you back, huh? Maybe if I had a couple fucking hours to spare... Ah, shit— speaking of—" Dream grabs his unresisting captive underneath his arms, dragging him back up to go through the portal.

Tommy had planned on Dream strangling him, carrying him in his arms, grabbing him by the collar of his shirt, stabbing him in the back, he hadn't considered Dream dragging his corpse around. The world starts to blur when Dream realizes that underneath Tommy's left arm, Dream can feel the hard edges of something almost like a die.

Dream laughs, stopping in his little cavern in the overworld, Tommy falling back against him limply. Dream ruffles his hair. "Oh, Tommy. Bet you thought you were clever."

Chapter End Notes

it was a nice plan. might've worked even.

if Punz wasn't a bitch.

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

CW: threats of violence, dead bodies, mild self harm.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Wilbur thinks he must still have a mild concussion. The first thing he feels upon waking is a wave of nausea like the room is spinning. He hasn't even opened his eyes yet. He's laying on a bed, not an especially comfortable one but far better than the damp floor. The room has enough light that even with his eyes shut he feels it pressing in. Wilbur can also feel cool metal around his wrist. He opens his eyes a hair.

"Ow... *fuck*," Wilbur groans, the back of his head pounding, his mouth dry and tasting awful. Wilbur moves his free hand up to his head, lifting it just enough that he can feel the large welt formed there, crusted with dried blood. Wilbur manages to glance around the room. He's in that same cell. Dream hadn't thrown him back in the other one. That immediately sets him on edge. It's too *kind*.

Even with the chain around his wrist.

Wilbur lifts his left hand slowly, the chain clinking lightly as he does. He's not chained down to the bed. The coil is long enough Wilbur thinks he could traverse half the room. Maybe not to the door— or the spot where a door *would* be— but enough to get himself water from the sink or something. Again, too kind.

Wilbur remembers the source of his rage before he got bludgeoned over the back of the head. Wilbur makes a poor, impulsive decision. He bolts upright.

"Tommy?!" Wilbur says panickedly to a clearly empty room. "Oh, *aw, fuck*— why did I—" Wilbur stops his complaining, shutting his mouth and eyes sharply to stop the room's spinning and to stop himself from puking on the wet stone floors.

As if on cue, the stone on the far wall slides away, revealing Dream standing alone.

"Oh, good. You're awake," Dream says cheerily.

"Where's..." Wilbur does his best to glare at the man, forced to pause for a moment to wait for the pounding in his head to settle. "Where is he?"

"That's why I'm here, actually," Dream meanders into the room, cool and casual. He doesn't get too close, though. Wilbur would guess he gets close enough he's just beyond the reach of the length of chain. "Want a smoke?" Dream offers him a cigarette.

Wilbur isn't even angry for a moment, just confused. "Why... are you..? You're rewarding me."

"Well, if you want to call it that, sure," Dream laughs lightly.

"Shouldn't you be doing the opposite? Considering I kicked your green teletubby ass a few hours ago?" Wilbur says dryly, smirking and undeniably smug.

Dream pauses for a moment. Wilbur can imagine the man trying to keep his composure behind the mask.

"Do you *want* me to do the opposite?" He says it coolly, like it's a threat he's confident will work.

"I don't fucking care what you do with me— Where the fuck is Tommy?" Wilbur snarls, proud of himself for keeping it together enough to sound harsh without being sick from the meager effort.

"Hm," Dream considers him for a moment. "I wanted to give you this," he offers the cigarette again. "To settle your nerves. Right? It's a big day today. I'm... going to go pick Tommy up now."

Wilbur jumps to his feet without thinking, but he doesn't reach the end of the length of chain or even take a step forward, he sways for a moment before he falls back to sitting on the bed like a drunk. He doesn't know how he's still cognizant at all. He doesn't know why Dream knocked him out instead of killing him—

Did Dream knock him out? The last thing Wilbur remembers is Dream struggling to breathe on the ground beneath him.

Dream laughs. "Aw, Wilbur, I *knew* you'd be excited!" He sounds so fucking patronizing, like he's talking to a small child. "Don't worry, I am too. But I'd take it easy. For your health."

"Fuck you," Wilbur mutters, a hand pressed to his forehead as it aches. Dream doesn't have Tommy yet. There's a reason he came to Wilbur before and not after. This way he gets to gloat. That Tommy is not yet beyond saving but soon he will be and Wilbur will be able to do nothing but wait for Dream to take him. "You're not hurting me because you're going to get Tommy," Wilbur says softly.

"What's that?"

"That's why you haven't punished me, right? You're going to get Tommy. And that's—" Wilbur swallows thickly. "That's punishment enough right?"

Dream pauses, thinking it over. "...For now." He sounds pleased.

"Christ—" Wilbur sighs. "Taking it out on Tommy won't keep me in line, Dream, I'll— I'll only fight harder to make you stop—"

“That’s fine,” Dream says with far too much calm. “You can fight me as much as you want, Wilbur. And then I’ll hurt Tommy as much as necessary, and eventually one of us breaks. And I *really* don’t think it’s going to be me.”

Wilbur is silenced.

“I’m going to go bring him home. See, Tommy has been much better behaved lately than you have. That’s why you get to sit here all cozy and safe despite your little tantrum. Do you understand?”

Wilbur says nothing.

“Wilbur? Can you not hear me? I asked if you understand.”

“He won’t... Tommy won’t go with you, he isn’t stupid, he knows this won’t fix anything...” Wilbur mutters, knuckles white as he balls them into fists, staring at the floor like he can glare a hole in it.

“Yeah, right,” Dream laughs. “*Tommy* isn’t stupid. Honestly this is the smartest thing he’s done. He knows being a stubborn brat won’t help him. He knows his little friends can’t— or really won’t bother to save you, so he’s taking the only reasonable option left. Why, what do *you* think he’s gonna do? I’ll go to get him and he’ll just say *kidding!* and run for it?”

Or he’s got a plan. He and Tubbo are cooking something up and they’re going to rip you to pieces.

Except Tubbo would never put Tommy at risk.

And Tommy is doing this for me, so he wouldn’t do it just to catch Dream and oh fuck Tommy is going to go with him he’s actually going to go with him and you can’t save him he can’t fucking do this he knows what Dream will do to him and there’s nothing you can do but fucking sit here—

“I’ll... I’ll take that cigarette now,” Wilbur says hoarsely, anger melting into dread, weak and useless. He never thought he’d think this, but he wishes he would never see Tommy again.

~

It’s been a while since Tommy has been back here. Tommy feels a burning sensation in his stomach, a product of shame, frustration, fear, and pure exhaustion. It’s hardly noticeable alongside the age old feeling of his atoms slowly but surely being tugged apart.

It takes him maybe an hour to get the hang of it again, to get himself back on the floor instead of falling. Whatever comfort the void had once offered is gone. He’ll find peace in it again. After a few more days with Dream, this void will surely become a paradise.

He’s with Dream.

Tommy feels a sob rise in the back of his throat as he is reminded that even now, Dream is dragging his body to who knows where. And eventually he will bring him back. Tommy

doesn't know what Dream has planned. He'll punish him, surely. For all the trouble Tommy has put him through. Maybe he'll get very lucky and Tubbo will come to his rescue before things get too bad, just like last time.

Tommy has a funny feeling it won't be like last time.

Tommy lets out hiccuping sobs, he doesn't try to bury it, he doesn't know what to do with it but try to breathe around it. "*It isn't fair!*" Tommy screams to the unforgiving void. He's gasping for breath. Tommy hasn't cried like this in a long time. He doesn't know when he'll next get the chance. It's only safe to cry while dead, so Tommy wails to this cruel afterlife and bangs his trembling fists on the ground until his knuckles break and heal, wishing he could tear it apart, wishing he could tear *everything* apart.

The ground cracks beneath him. The floor— it's always looked like polished obsidian, that doesn't mean that's what it is— but it cracks. Tommy wanted to break things, so Limbo obliges.

The next time his knuckles break, shattering against the obsidian which splinters in turn, they don't heal. This has never happened before. Tommy had spent hours in Limbo trying to make himself bleed, to give himself any sense of control or impact or permanence, only to remain stagnant and as helpless as the day he'd died. For once his state of being does not reset, for once Tommy can impact himself, but only to break himself apart.

He doesn't stop.

Maybe he should cherish these precious hours of peace, knowing the real hardship will begin on his return, but it just isn't fucking *fair*.

The floor never shatters. He doesn't start falling again, the ground just continues to splinter. A spiderweb of cracks spreading out further and further with each blow, his broken hands ache and protest, shards of black rock chipping away and sticking to the blood on his hands, but still he persists. He cannot stop.

He just wanted his brother.

These hours are not enough. They never were.

~

Dream is moving again. It seems he's resolutely decided on the overworld and has continued on to his destination. Tubbo thinks this should feel like a hopeful thing, it's something he can follow. Somehow he almost finds it more worrying. Dream had caught on, at least to some extent, to what was happening. Why would he abandon his caution now? Before, they had been at a stalemate but at least Dream had been stuck. Now, Tubbo has no idea what he could be doing.

"He's moving again?" Ranboo falls in line beside him the moment he starts walking.

“Yeah. Yeah, he’s— he’s staying in the overworld,” Tubbo frowns down at his compass, hesitating. The needle stills, set on one direction, unmoving. He doesn’t know if he should take off running or if this is a ruse to get him away from the portal. He doesn’t have fucking time to overthink things. He sets off at a quick jog. This is not a chase for sprinting toward a horizon, this is a slow, methodical hunt. Tubbo will find this man. He isn’t going to stop. There is nothing more dangerous than a pursuit predator and this time Tubbo is going to be the one hunting him down. Tubbo runs a little faster.

The needle has begun to turn.

~

The worst of the nausea had faded, the room had stopped spinning. Wilbur is still plenty miserable though. He thought he’d gone numb to the bitter, ashen feeling of cigarettes, but in the past hours all he’s been able to think about is the acrid taste coating his tongue, the way it clings to his teeth, the damp in the air exacerbating it until whatever relief a single cigarette offered is replaced only by irritable disgust.

That’s a lie.

Wilbur’s past hours have been consumed by one thought and one thought alone: Tommy.

Wilbur had hoped that when Dream gave him the cigarette, he would’ve gotten within reach of the length of chain around his wrist so he could give strangling him one more attempt, but when Wilbur had ever so pathetically yielded, wiltingly telling Dream he’d take a smoke, Dream had simply tossed a cigarette and a single match to him. Wilbur should’ve known better than to think Dream would get that close again.

So instead Wilbur was left alone with a reward and a promise.

Soon he would have his brother back.

Wilbur couldn’t imagine anything worse.

Wilbur had spent the past hours staring up at the ceiling gloomily, he sits up again, vehement and resentful, tugging furiously at the chain around his wrist. This isn’t the first time he’s tried to break free, that much is evident from the beads of blood and the bruises forming around his wrist. If he broke his thumb, maybe he could wriggle free, and he’s tried. Wilbur has tugged against that chain until the pain was too sharp and he had to stop. Wilbur still isn’t used to feeling things again, let alone attempting to force a bone out of its socket.

“Fuck!” Wilbur shouts hoarsely into the empty cell, wrist aching. The chain is anchored into the wall. He’s already tried this, but Wilbur tries again. He places his feet against the wall, holding onto the chain, and tries to kick off the wall hard enough to break it.

Yet again, he just ends up on the ground, palms stinging from the chain slipping through his grip. Wilbur is breathing hard now, panic clawing up his throat. He is so fucking trapped. Maybe he should be used to it by now, but it’s so much harder knowing Tommy is soon to join him.

Wilbur remembers the exhausted, heartbroken relief, the joy mingled with loss, when he had seen Tommy saved. And it turns out none of that mattered, because only a few days later Dream brought him back, a delighted threat hanging in the air, one that is finally being fulfilled despite Wilbur's best and pathetic efforts. Wilbur presses his trembling, bloody palms against his eyes until he sees colors, every struggling inhale feels undeserved.

He's been nothing but a piece of bait on a fucking string. Not only has he failed to save his brother, he's the fucking weight tied to his ankle dragging him under the water. He's hurt Tommy enough, whatever Dream had done to get them in this situation, Wilbur is hurting Tommy again and he fucking hates himself for not being able to do a single thing to stop it. He couldn't kill Dream when he had the chance, and now he's too weak to even break a bone to get free. He's locked in a cell, but this is the one thing he can do. It's enough that maybe when Dream next shows up, he'll finally be able to strangle the bastard. Maybe then he'll be able to get Tommy home.

Optimism has been a struggle for Wilbur for a long time. Back in the early days of L'Manberg, he had been nothing but hopeful, unyielding faith in a bright future because he couldn't imagine it going any other way. Ever since the betrayal, the election, the war, the world has been nothing but a downward spiral for him. He doesn't know if whatever it is burning inside of him could be called optimism, but he wants to believe so badly that he still has a chance. Not for himself, Wilbur will gladly and easily fall into the morbid, hopeless dread of thinking he is beyond saving, but not Tommy. Never Tommy.

"Come on— Come on!" Wilbur's voice comes out trembling and choked, sniffles rising up out of childish frustration as much as fear. He steps on the chain and stands up sharply as he can. His thumb hurts, but it does not break. He merely falls over. "*Fuck!*" Wilbur staggers back to his feet, the chain rattling mocks him. "Okay, okay. Come on, Wil. Don't be a fucking idiot— Try something else." He scans the length of the room. It's small. Claustrophobically small. He wonders...

There's maybe just enough room he could build up the momentum into a run, just a few strides, but if he runs at the door as fast as he fucking can with what little space he has, the chain should run out a few feet before the wall, so instead of him cracking his skull open against the stone, it should just break his hand, right?

You crack your fucking skull open and it doesn't matter anyway.

Wilbur backs up until he is pressed against the far wall. He vaults himself off of the wall, running straight at the opposite one without hesitation. He shuts his eyes tightly, waiting for the chain to pull him back.

He hears redstone. Wilbur opens his eyes just as the chain stops him, his legs jolt forward without the rest of him and he hits the ground hard, the wind knocked out of him and his shoulder in agony.

The chain is still around his fucking wrist.

"Did you hear me coming?" Dream stares down at him from the now open corridor, sounding unimpressed. "What was this, you trying to... *attack* me?"

Wilbur cannot bring himself to speak, utterly occupied in the feeling of his shoulder on fire.

“Hm,” Dream enters the cell, crouching down beside him. He’s in range. If Wilbur wants to try to wrap the chain around his neck, now would be the time. Wilbur doesn’t move. It’s just his shoulder so why does *everything* fucking hurt? *Breathing* hurts. “Dislocated it, huh? Is that what you were trying to do?”

Wilbur still says nothing, simply glaring at the man with weary loathing.

Dream sighs, pushing Wilbur over onto his side, Wilbur managing a hoarse cry of indignation and not much else at Dream manhandling him, even as Dream pins him to the ground, a knee pressed against his spine. Wilbur’s voice breaks around a scream as Dream grabs his dislocated arm and sharply, easily, forces it back into place. Almost like he’s done this before. Wilbur doesn’t have the energy to ruminate on that, too occupied on the profound relief as he lays flat on his back, shoulder still aching but far less acutely. He feels clammy now, mouth too dry at the same time. He still just tastes cigarettes.

“All better?” Dream says teasingly. He grabs Wilbur’s free hand at first he thinks to pull him off the ground, but instead Dream wraps the next section of chain around his other wrist, relocking it. “Sorry, Wilbur. Still can’t trust you to behave.” Now he drags him to his feet. “I’d be careful if I were you. Try to do something else, try to get your hands on me, next time I put you in a straight jacket,” Dream yanks him forward toward the door, as if to emphasize his irritation. He puts an arm around Wilbur’s shoulders, Wilbur hunching inward in disgust. Dream pulls him closer, almost camaraderially, “and try to bite me again, I’ll put a fucking muzzle on you, got it?” He claps him on the back like a supportive coach.

“Where the fuck is he?” Wilbur says with as much vitriol as he can muster.

Dream chuckles, letting go of Wilbur’s shoulders and walking ahead, dragging him behind him. “You’re not very perceptive, d’you know that?”

Wilbur stares at him reproachfully for a moment before scanning the rest of the corridor. He can see the entryway to the neighboring cell only a few more feet down the hall.

“Tommy?!” Wilbur barrels past Dream around the corner, Dream letting him go, the chain slack in his hand. “Tommy!” Wilbur falls to his knees beside his brother, curled on the floor. Wilbur reaches out his trembling, bound hands to roll Tommy over to face him. Tommy does not resist or react in any way, his head lolls limply at an impossibly sharp angle.

There’s no blood.

Wilbur hadn’t suspected Tommy to be dead because there’s no blood.

He should’ve known better.

“Tommy...” Wilbur murmurs his name like it makes any difference, reaching out to brush a hand against Tommy’s face before stopping himself. Tommy looks wrong.

He’s seen Tommy while dead.

He's never seen Tommy *dead*.

Wilbur feels sick.

"Stop worrying. His bones got broken after he was dead," Dream scoffs. "Well, except for his neck. But I promise, he didn't feel a thing," he says it like a joke. "Well, probably. Who knows."

Wilbur doesn't move.

"Come on. I'm on a bit of a time crunch here and I need you to do something," Dream says.

Wilbur still doesn't move. Dream tugs on the chain, Wilbur falling backwards to the ground, but other than that completely unresponsive. Dream grabs onto the scruff of his jacket, pulling him to his feet. Wilbur still just stares at Tommy's corpse in transfixed horror.

"Hey," Dream snaps his fingers in front of his eyes. "No, no don't look at him. If you want to help him, look at me."

Wilbur tears his gaze from the sight of Tommy's broken spine pressing too far against pale, lifeless skin and to that empty white mask in his face.

"W-What?"

"If you want to help him, Wilbur," Dream says slowly, carefully, sure to see that his captive audience understands, "you'll do exactly what I say."

~

"Wake up."

Tommy wakes up alone. He takes inventory almost out of habit. Nothing seems broken, his neck is a bit sore. There's a rope around his waist keeping him secured to a chair.

The lodestone.

Tommy had really expected it to still be there. He'd imagine his future struggles would largely involve keeping it a secret, but the moment he comes to, he knows it's gone. The comforting, irritating presence of the tiny stone digging into his arm is instead nothing. Tommy feels his blood run cold.

"Hey, Tommy."

Tommy snaps to attention, across a long wooden table sits Dream, fiddling with something in his hands.

"Welcome back, Tommy! Welcome back to exile!" Dream says brightly, placing whatever it is flat on the table. Tommy is used to following Dream's hands, checking for a weapon, but the sight of a compass, glowing softly purple, is far more terrifying than a knife. He looks back up to that mask and tries to be brave.

“W-Where’s Wilbur?”

“Oh, *you know*,” Dream says teasingly. “Here and there,” he gestures vaguely to the room.

Tommy scans the room. Damp stonebrick, the room lit by sea lanterns pressed into the floor along the edge of the outer wall.

“What does that... mean..?” Tommy asks carefully.

“Well, I told you I’d send you *pieces* of him. And that I had the rest of him. I made no promises of what state he’d be in,” Dream sounds so smug. “And I have a feeling you need at least *most* of the pieces in order to bring someone back.”

“...So he’s dead, then?” Tommy’s first feeling is relief. Dead means Dream isn’t torturing him.

“No,” Dream’s response is immediate and irritable when Tommy doesn’t react with panic at the thought of his brother’s body chopped up and scattered. Tommy knows there are worse things to be afraid of. That makes the game no longer fun, so Dream breaks the ruse. “He’s not dead, actually. But you’ll just have to take my word for it.”

“Why?”

“Because you haven’t *earned seeing him*, Tommy,” Dream snaps.

Tommy isn’t acting terrified. Tommy isn’t sure who’s more surprised by this, him or Dream, but the fact of the matter is, Tommy waking up to find the lodestone missing was the final nail in the coffin. And right now, without a knife held to Wilbur or anything bad actually happening to him, Tommy finds it hard to show restraint.

“I came here, didn’t I? I came here because you have Wilbur,” Tommy doesn’t make demands, nor threats, nor anything quite antagonistic, merely stating facts, but that simple confidence is almost an insult to Dream’s absolute authority.

Dream goes quiet for a moment, staring down at the glowing compass in front of him. Tommy joins him. The needle slowly turns. Tommy doesn’t know what it means.

“Okay, fine. But you’re here now, aren’t you? And you’re not going anywhere. Wilbur doesn’t matter anymore. Because now I have *you*,” Dream replies with a similar cool statement of fact. “Yes, you came here for Wilbur. I said I’d stop hurting him, Tommy—well, actually I said I’d stop giving you *pieces* of him. Nothing in that said you got to see him again.”

Tommy is reproachful. He doesn’t know what Dream is playing at. Tommy knows his courage is a fast burning thing, something Dream will be quick to extinguish, but not right now. “The fuck do you mean?”

Dream stares at him, surprised by his audacity. “You’ve gotten *bold*. Did dying scramble your brain? I mean, you were being a defiant brat before I killed you, but still.” He scoffs. “Or... don’t tell me, you think Wilbur is going to protect you?”

Tommy has a tiny, nagging voice in the back of his mind telling him he's gone insane. It isn't enough to stop him from running his mouth. "Or maybe you just don't scare me anymore, Dream." A lie. "You're not gonna scare me by threatening Wilbur when he isn't even here." Another lie, but maybe one that will get Dream to take him to Wilbur. Maybe he shouldn't tempt punishment, but right now the unknown is worse.

"Uh huh," Dream says. "Don't worry, I'm not going to threaten Wilbur."

Tommy's courage crumbles too easily, just as he knew it would, because as far as he can tell, Dream isn't lying. *This is wrong.*

"What?"

"Wilbur is out of the picture, Tommy. Punz is busy keeping an eye on the Mainlands for me, so, it's just you and me. Just like it used to be. That's all I've ever wanted, Tommy. To go back to the good old days," Dream sounds horribly, genuinely wistful. "I didn't need Wilbur to break you then and I certainly don't need him now."

Tubbo has been following that needle for another good hour. Dream was smart. He must have quickly covered ground in the Nether, and now is making them play catch up in the overworld. Still, he persists. He must be getting closer in some fucking capacity. Dream is the one hauling along a dead body. They had entered a dark oak forest maybe ten minutes ago, the needle having slowly turned from the coast inland to the woods.

Technoblade points ahead, silent and careful. Tubbo hears it before he spots it, a twig snapping, rapid footfalls. Without a word, the four of them sprint after the sound.

"What the fuck are you on about?" Tommy's voice grows weak and hoarse. *Wrong wrong wrong wrong wrong—*

"I thought you'd be *happy*," Dream feigns offense. "This is what you were begging for, remember? When we made our little deal in the woods?"

"Dream, please, what do you— What do you mean?"

"Isn't it obvious, Tommy?"

Tubbo takes the lead, ducking under the low branches more easily than the taller members of their party, the thick canopy turning daylight to dusk as Tubbo keeps his eyes locked on the figure becoming less and less distant by the second, the needle pointing resolutely forward.

"It's over— Dream, stop!" Sapnap shouts just as Tubbo shoves his way through the dense underbrush, tackling their target to the ground. A terrified familiar face, a white streak in his hair.

Dream leans forward, sliding the compass across the table. "He *left you*." A thousand blocks away, Tubbo stares at Wilbur Soot on the ground beside him.

Chapter End Notes

;)

(I hope that last scene wasn't too incoherent, the back and forth bits. They felt too short to put in little scene dividers, but I hope it made sense with context clues and all that idk)

as always, feedback is cherished <3

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

this one is a bit shorter than my usual chapters but who cares it's my party <3

CW: violence, abuse, gaslighting/manipulation. We're back to the c!Dream content what'dya expect

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Wilbur wasn't dead for this journey and he wishes that meant he would be of some use finding his way back to Tommy, but he was knocked out. He had neither the privilege of seeing Tommy while dead nor the luck of seeing where the fuck he was going. He came to with a pounding migraine, blindfolded and bound in the bottom of a boat. He's outside. Wilbur hasn't been outside in years. The scent of salt, the sun leaving him boiling in his coat, the constant motion of the boat, the sound of the waves. He's sure if he could see it would be blinding.

"Oh good, you're awake," Dream sees him flinch when the boat jolts to a stop against the coastline. "Come on. If you're conscious you can walk."

"I wouldn't say that's necessarily the case," Wilbur says ruefully. He reaches up to take off the blindfold, instead he stops with a yelp when Dream slaps him across the face.

"I didn't say you could do that. Come on," Dream grabs his arm, hauling him up and into the sand. "Start walking."

"How the fuck am I meant to do that if I can't *see*?" Wilbur snaps. He's already dizzy enough from the other significant head trauma he's received in the past hours. Fresh off of a boat and blindfolded, he might as well be spinning in circles.

"I'll guide you. Get going. Like I said, we're on a schedule," Dream says, shoving him forward.

"Where exactly are we going?" Wilbur stumbles, the short stretch of beach quickly turning to earth which is at least a bit more stable than sand. He inhales deeply, the scent of grass on a cool breeze makes his chest ache. Every few steps or so Dream grabs him and pulls him to one side to stop him from Wilbur would assume hitting something.

"Does it matter?"

"I guess not," Wilbur mutters. Wilbur isn't sure if Dream is making him change directions a bunch or wander in circles or if he's just that disoriented. Wilbur is so fucking tired. The world gets darker all of the sudden and Dream begins to move him around more sharply.

They're underneath trees. In the woods, Wilbur assumes. The damp scent of a forest he probably would appreciate more if he weren't so focused on keeping standing. The particular coolness of shade is so different to that of being underground. It feels cleaner, despite the many more overwhelming scents in the air. Dream's hold on his arm as he drags him around trees is sure to leave a bruise. Wilbur's sense of time has been skewed for a while now, they could've been walking for twenty minutes or an hour. It feels far too long, his legs sore, his left ankle protesting as he'd managed to bend it wrong staggering over a root.

"That's far enough," Dream stops him.

"Now what?" Wilbur tries to turn to face him.

Dream tears off the blindfold, Wilbur blinking in the dull light of the forest floor. It's a dark oak forest, the canopy thick and leaving the world in shadow.

"Now you're going to run," Dream grabs his wrists, tying something around his left before unchaining him.

Wilbur is untied. He can see and somewhat has his bearings. This is the part where he tries to tear out Dream's throat. Wilbur takes one step forward, hands balled into fists. Dream can see it in his face what he intends to do next.

"Ah ah," Dream puts a hand to the sword on his hip. "Have you already forgotten why we're doing this little charade?"

Wilbur hesitates. He still wants to try to throttle the man.

Dream continues, patronizing to the last. "What happens if you don't do everything I say?" Wilbur says nothing. "I asked you a question, Wilbur. Tell me what happens if you don't do everything I say. Unless you'd prefer a demonstration."

Wilbur wishes the loathing boiling up in his chest were worth something. "You'll hurt Tommy," Wilbur says, voice taut with rage.

"There you go, Wilbur. That's right," Dream still talks like a teacher to a child. "I'll hurt Tommy. And what's your job right now?"

"To run."

"Exactly. And what happens if you stop running, if you drop the lodestone, if you try to follow me? I promise it's an easy one."

Wilbur's nails dig into his palms until they hurt. It's all he can do not to throw himself at Dream. "You'll hurt Tommy."

"Good job!" Dream says cheerfully. "Don't worry, if you decide you want to come back, just kill yourself and let Tommy know. Trust me, I can get a hold of the body. Alright, you already have the lodestone. Go on, then. Start running. Run like... well, like I'm chasing you," he laughs. "Or no—" he considers him for a moment. "Run like I'm chasing *Tommy*. Don't stop. I know your lungs are probably weak, but if you stop running, I'll know," Dream

taps the compass hanging from his belt. “And I’ll do what, Wilbur?” He’s just having fun now, but Wilbur has no choice but to indulge him.

“Hurt Tommy.”

Dream laughs, delightedly smug. “Now you’re getting it. One foot in front of the other. I’d get going.”

Wilbur wishes he had more insults to fling Dream’s way, but he’s just so tired. So he does as he’s told and takes off running like his life— *Tommy’s* life, depends on it.

The branches scratch at his face, the ground is uneven, he actually thinks he did better blind with Dream to guide him. Wilbur hasn’t been outside in so long and he doesn’t even have the luxury to appreciate it. It’s one foot in front of the other. He’s not used to an uneven ground, his clumsy feet and boots worn down from the Pogtopia days keeps getting caught on roots as the dark oak forest thickens, branches low enough he almost knocks himself out a few times.

You could stop. You could give up and find some old log to die under.

Instead, Wilbur turns his path as erratically as he can manage, just to make sure the compass needle shows he’s still trying. Even if Wilbur won’t know if Dream has hurt Tommy, Wilbur doesn’t think Dream is above hurting Tommy just because he has an excuse. Wilbur is so focused on running, he has no fucking idea what slams into him like a ton of bricks and sends him reeling to the ground. Wilbur vaguely hears voices, but everything feels distorted around him save for his own pounding heart. He doesn’t bother trying to get his bearings, he scrambles back to his feet and gets ready to bolt.

You stopped running. He said you’re not allowed to stop why are you stopped you cannot stop running—

Wilbur cries out in panic as he is stopped from bolting for the treeline by an unsure hand on his shoulder, he slaps them away but before he can resume his efforts, two large arms wrap around him, lifting him from the ground. Wilbur screams like he’s been injured, struggling fiercely even as the low, familiar rumble of Techno trying to soothe him pierces the haze. It’s enough that he’s coherent enough for words.

“Let me go! I have t-to run! Dream told me to run!” Wilbur still kicks wildly but he might as well be pounding his bloody fists against the walls of the train station for all the good it will do him.

“Wilbur— Where is he?!” Tubbo is screaming right back, pacing in front of Techno, almost jumping in the air to try and get up to Wilbur’s height. “Where the fuck is Tommy?!”

Tommy’s name reminds Wilbur of the reason behind his cause and his screaming is broken by a whimper, “he’s gonna hurt him I need t-to go he said I had to—”

“He said you had to *what*, Wilbur?” Techno asks.

“Run! He said I had to fucking run, alright?! H-He’ll know if I’ve stopped—”

“He... probably wanted you to run to get to us, right?” It’s an unfamiliar voice of reason which finally calms him.

Wilbur looks to the towering half-enderman he’s only seen through a ghostly haze. “To... to get to you.”

“Yeah. Why else would you have run right into us, right?” The stranger repeats slowly, carefully. “You’ve done your job, then.”

“Right... right...” Wilbur stops fighting, hanging limply with Techno’s arms still around him.

“Where’s Tommy?” Tubbo calms a hair from his companion’s far more mellow tone, but he still looks like he’s trying not to combust.

“H-He’s...” Wilbur is immediately choked up as he sees his own anguish written on Tubbo’s scarred face. Techno deems him sane enough to set down and it’s all Wilbur can do to keep standing at all. “He’s—”

Tubbo turns white and at first Wilbur thinks he might faint but instead he’s screaming again—*“How could you fucking leave him there?!”*

Wilbur opens his mouth to reply but instead of words there is only a broken sob like a wounded animal. This only confirms Tubbo’s worst fears.

“Where is he, Wilbur? Where is he?” Tubbo stumbles forward and grabs onto the tarnished collar of Wilbur’s shirt, more desperation than rage.

“I don’t...” Wilbur’s hoarse voice is barely above a whisper. He does not look Tubbo in the eye, he merely stares, fixated, on some empty space in the distance.

“Wilbur, *please*,” Tubbo is choking on sobs. “Where’s Tommy?!”

“I don’t know.”

Tubbo’s terror once more succumbs to rage and he pulls back his fist, wanting to break Wilbur open so he can shatter to pieces the same way Tubbo can feel himself tearing apart at those mere words but before he can decide if he could actually finish the blow he stops. He stops because Wilbur flinches back and covers his face like he’s expecting it.

Just like Tommy.

So instead Tubbo breaks. Terror and rage are left weak and something horribly like grief swallows him whole. Tubbo still clings to Wilbur’s shirt, but instead he buries his face in it and cries like somehow this time Wilbur will save them.

~

“He didn’t...” Tommy’s mouth feels very dry. “He wouldn’t leave me you fucking asshole. You put him somewhere or some shit.”

Dream laughs, unoffended by Tommy's sharp words. "Look at this compass, Tommy. You know what it's connected to, right?"

Tommy stares at it, softly glowing purple, the needle wavering back and forth. "My lodestone."

"Yep. That was clever of you, you know. Still, I just connected my own compass to it and made a deal with Wilbur. I told him if he took it with him, he would be free to go. I have you now and I don't need him, so. I'm sorry, Tommy, but he left," Dream feigns pity. "I mean, come on, I don't need both of you. Did you really expect him to stay?"

Tommy glances up from the compass to that white mask even as the sight makes him feel sick to his stomach. "You're a fucking idiot. He'll— He'll lead them back here. That's why he left. You can't— There's got to be more to it. You trying to trap more people or some shit?"

"How stupid do you think I am?" Now there's a hint of annoyance in his voice. "Obviously I knocked him out, dragged him out of here blindfolded. He'll have no idea where I am. Maybe he'll take a stab at a general radius, but all it took was a short trip through the Nether to really put some distance between us. *No one* is coming, Tommy. They only found you last time because you snitched to those endermen. And not sure if you've noticed, endermen won't be finding their way in here without getting some nasty burns."

Every word from Dream sinks dread deeper under his skin. He inexplicably thinks of a nightmare— one where Tommy follows Wilbur into a grave only to turn around and find himself buried alone.

He didn't leave you. Dream sent him away. There's a difference.

It doesn't feel like enough.

"How about this," Dream drums his fingers on the table, the noise enough to make Tommy flinch. "If you're so sure that Wilbur will come back, you should be on your best behavior, alright? Because all the times I should have hurt him for what you did and couldn't since he ran away, I'll keep track. And when he comes back, he'll pay for it."

"That's not— That's not fair," Tommy stammers.

Dream laughs, rather than angered by Tommy's protests, he continues on with that same cold confidence. "*Fair?* Is that what you're worried about? Tommy, I don't lie to you. I give you consequences for your actions, but keeping you in line is the most important part. I'm not doing this to be fair to Wilbur. This is about *you*. Your behavior decides if Wilbur pays for it, right? I mean, that sounds pretty fair to me."

Tommy struggles to think of some other defense. "They're going to come find me. They'll never stop looking."

"Oh, is that so?" Dream sounds so fucking amused, like he was hoping Tommy would say that. "They're gonna come rescue you? How are they gonna find you, Tommy? Tell me."

“I got away before,” Tommy stares at the table in front of him, trying to ignore the glow of purple and the needle still slowly turning.

“Yes. You did,” Dream says with all the patronization of praising a child for tying their shoes. “You were very lucky, Tommy. And I’ve made sure that will never happen again.”

Tommy scowls. It’s easier than confronting the chill that cruel words can send through him. “You thought I’d never get away before. And you fucking failed. And I *killed you*. Twice,” Tommy laughs, high and hoarse and maybe a little unhinged. “You’ve got one life now! Just like me! Not so tough, are ya? How’d that axe taste? Must’ve hurt.” Tommy grows mocking, bordering on the hysterical, “oh, did poor wittle *Dream* get *crushed* by a wittle axe? Was it scary having to beg me for your fucking life—“

The sound of skin hitting skin, a weak gasp, and Tommy is silenced. He doesn’t continue, only his shaky breathing occupies the space between them as he stares down at the rough wooden grain of the table, eyes wide and utterly empty like a stunned rabbit, cheek still stinging. There’s a cut just underneath his left eye, blood dripping down his face. Tommy can just barely see Dream’s hands folded across the table, blood staining a ring on his right hand. Dream doesn’t wear jewelry, but maybe he does if the head of the ring is metal coming to a sharpened point.

Tommy is done. He’d pushed, just to see how far he could go, and now he has his answer. The cut underneath his eye is too close. His lower eyelid burns, skin delicate and especially susceptible to being torn. Tommy can see the blood almost caught in his eyelashes. Dream could have blinded him. Tommy almost wonders if he’d been trying to. “Why’d you make me do that, Tommy?” He sighs wearily. “Just... Just be grateful this time it was just a warning, okay?”

Tommy doesn’t say another word. He blinks away the blood welling into his eye, *a warning?*

Dream stands, circling the table. Tommy flinches as he places a gentle hand on his shoulder and leans down so they’d be eye to eye if Tommy dared look up. “You know better, Tommy,” Dream says it with such pity that it almost sounds like an apology. Almost.

~

All Wilbur can do is hug Tubbo back and think about how unfair it is that he’s here and Tommy isn’t. He hasn’t hugged Tubbo in over a decade. He feels just as small now as he had back then.

“It’s okay. It’s not over yet, we’ll find them,” it is Sapnap of all people who speaks up as a voice of reason, or if not reason, at least something wearily like hope.

Tubbo seems to come out of some sort of daze at this, quickly stepping away from Wilbur. “How the fuck do you suppose we do that?”

“Wilbur. Where did you last see Dream?” Sapnap is utterly focused. This is something he knows how to do.

“I– I don’t–” Wilbur turns around, staring at identical tree after identical tree. “We were on a beach, we came here in a boat–”

Sapnap looks more grim at this. No tracks to follow over water.

“There’s a beach a few hundred blocks that way,” Technoblade points.

“How do you know?” Ranboo asks.

Techno shrugs. “Human GPS.”

“Okay, we’ll go,” Sapnap starts off determinedly.

Techno is the next to follow.

Tubbo and Wilbur don’t move, sharing a look of mutual exhaustion.

“Come on,” Ranboo nudges Tubbo gently. “We’re gonna find him.”

Tubbo breaks Wilbur’s gaze without a word. He starts walking, but none of this feels quite real. His old mentor, his president, his general, a dead man through and through, has stumbled back into his life and now in some morbid twist of fate is the closest connection to Tommy he has left.

It doesn’t take long for them to hit the sand. Wilbur felt like he’d run much further than he actually had.

Sapnap had gotten there first, he paces, hesitant and still trying.

“If you’re looking for footprints or where the boat came up, the waves would’ve washed it away by now,” Techno points out.

“Yeah, yeah sure,” Sapnap, twirls his sword through his fingers, turning it over with his wrist as he desperately tries to think. “Tubbo, what about the prison portal? I didn’t see an exit, but Punz said he saw them go through there. He could’ve tunneled out, right?”

“What?” Tubbo stares, startled that Sapnap is talking to him.

“He could’ve– We should go look for a tunnel,” he repeats more firmly.

“Are you sure we should leave here? This is around the last place anyone’s seen Dream, so…” Ranboo scuffs his feet in the sand.

“Uhhh. Nope, I mean I said if he took a boat, nothin’ to follow out here,” Techno shrugs.

“But what if he’s near? What if he didn’t really take me that far?” Wilbur asks desperately.

“Well… Doubt it, but if you guys wanna take a boat out there, go for it. No idea what you’d be looking for,” Techno looks to Ranboo. “You wanna make us another portal?”

“Yeah, sure, I can– sure,” Ranboo nods quickly.

Tubbo and Wilbur still haven't moved.

"If we get a boat," Wilbur swallows thickly, feeling a sob in the back of his throat without really knowing why— why now, why does he choke on these words?— "If we get a boat, and we go out that way," he points, a weight tugging on his left wrist. The Lodestone. "Don't want it," he murmurs hoarsely, tugging at the neat bow tightly tied at the top. The knot only tightens, and Wilbur is left desperately yanking at it, the ribbon tugging against skin already raw from the chain. "I don't want it... I want it fucking gone..."

"What's that?" Technoblade asks. "Is that the lodestone?" He laughs nervously.

Wilbur barely glances at him, still trying to break it off, but it seems he's too weak to even break a fucking ribbon.

"What's with the ribbon? Is the lodestone supposed to be like... a present?" Techno says skeptically.

Now Wilbur stops, hand still wrapped around the ribbon, but no longer trying to break it. He stares at the crumpled bow with loathing in his chest. "No, not that."

"Then, what is it?" Sapnap sounds like he's trying to hold back panic. Wilbur's answer will be a reflection of someone Sapnap had once trusted.

"It's—" Wilbur's voice breaks off.

Tubbo steps up beside him and cuts it free with a knife, stopping as it falls into the sand and he realizes he's staring at the knife Tommy had used to carve into the apiary. *Why do I have this?*

Only with the lodestone gone does Wilbur look up, twisting his hand around his wrist like he's still trying to remove the feeling of the fabric. He clears his throat, meeting Sapnap's gaze, looking almost numb. "No, no I'm the present." Silence presses in, broken only by the waves. "I— I'm the present." Wilbur nods again, looking a minute away from being sick.

No one knows what to say, or how to proceed. The fact of the matter is whether they search the oceans or the nether, there will be no trail to follow. Their only hope lies wrapped in a broken ribbon in the sand.

"Where'd Dream get the ribbon?" Ranboo is the one who speaks first, all eyes turning to him in confusion. He hesitates with that many eyes on him. "I mean, d'you guys think he has like a craft room..? With like, sequins and glitter too?"

It takes them all a moment to realize Ranboo is making a joke. It's hard to tell who starts laughing first between the two of them, but Tubbo looks at Wilbur, and Wilbur looks back, and they're crumbling to hysterics.

"Oh my gosh— I am so sorry—" Ranboo panics at first, thinking he's reduced them both to tears, before realizing somehow it's much worse. Wilbur hits the ground first, already weak, curling into a ball as his stomach aches from laughter, Tubbo all but falls on top of him, tears

spilling out alongside something *almost* like his usual cackle and the other three members present can only assume they've both gone mad.

Wilbur looks over as Tubbo leans against him, steady enough to at least focus on taking deep breaths, and there's something of a mutual understanding there. Neither of them think it's fair that Wilbur is there and Tommy isn't. Neither of them wanted it to go this way. That gives them something of an allyship.

Chapter End Notes

we know it's hopeless, don't we? I think Tubbo and Wilbur are catching on :)

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

CW: abuse, threats, claustrophobia, sickness. c!Dream. The usual.

“Don’t look so sad, Tommy. This is supposed to be your welcome home party!” Dream says cheerfully. “I would’ve made a cake, but I’ve been a bit busy lately.”

Tommy doesn’t say anything. Maybe the smart thing to do would be to never speak again. Instead he glances around the room, taking in the scenery. The long table set up, the empty seats circling it. It’s familiar. Maybe it’s the tinge of saltwater to the air that makes him recognize it— it’s the same table from exile. From his set up on the beach. For all he knows it’s the *exact same table*. Tommy doesn’t want to know what sort of miserable copy of that day Dream might have in mind.

“Can we talk, Tommy? Old friend to old friend?” Dream pulls him from his thoughts. He sounds almost hurt, somewhere between pouting and scolding him like a school teacher, his head resting on one hand, propped up on his elbow. “We’ve got some things to figure out, don’t we?” Another pause for Tommy to reply. He doesn’t. “I’m a little confused, you see, Tommy. Because that little *incident* out in the mesa is confusing! Right? You can see how I’m confused, right?”

Dream is so viciously patronizing it almost reminds Tommy of Schlatt. He knows where that leads as well. Someone always gets burned.

“Because, you see, I made that base as a nice, steady backup plan. I had it marked out on maps because it was so far away from anything recognizable, but you stuck your nose where it didn’t belong, just like you always do, and you *saw* those maps, didn’t you?”

Tommy stares at him, feeling like there’s a lead weight in the bottom of his stomach.

“*Didn’t you?!* ” Dream shouts, slamming his fist on the table. Tommy jumps, eyes shut tightly, trembling, waiting for the next blow, tension fizzling through his veins like static. “I expect an answer, Tommy. You can speak when you’re spoken to, did you forget that part? Actually, you *have* to speak when you’re spoken to. So, if you don’t mind,” Dream returns to that cool, dangerous calm in an instant.

“W-What?” Tommy has already forgotten what he’s meant to be answering.

“You saw the maps. To the other base, right?” Dream repeats slowly, carefully.

“Y-Yes, I– I did.”

“Okay, good. Thank you for being honest with me,” Dream says with mock civility. “Now, what I don’t get, is how your little friends followed us, right? Because you have had no way to contact them. Let’s say you did– Why wait until right then to cry for help? For months they weren’t even looking, even if you couldn’t tell them where you were, they would’ve maybe bothered looking, if you annoyed them enough, I guess. So, something must have changed, right? You know what, I’m just talking over you, aren’t I? I’ll give you a chance to explain. So go right ahead, tell me, how is it they showed up at the mesa, a place *you* tangibly knew the location of, when you should have had no way to contact them. Explain that to me,” Dream drums against the table, leaning back in his chair, folding his arms over his chest and waiting.

Tommy tries to overcome the fear that blurs his thoughts, a hasty, frantic debate going on behind his eyes as he decides what sort of damage the truth will cause for him now.

Does it matter? It’s not like that’s a way out for him anymore and even if it were, the only way Dream would cut that away from him would be to stop killing him, and Tommy has a feeling he has no intention of stopping. Trying to lie will almost guarantee suffering, Tommy doesn’t even know what sort of lie he could try to piece together, and the truth feels as harmless as it is worthless.

“I got the coordinates to Ghostbur,” Tommy settles on the truth, saying so with enough certainty that he hopes Dream won’t doubt him.

Dream leans forward now, intrigued. “How?”

“When you– When Wilbur is alive, Ghostbur is in Limbo. So, we wrote the coordinates on the walls of Wilbur’s Limbo and I... I lied,” Tommy pauses, swallowing thickly. He’s being honest now– will Dream punish him for lying before? Who is he kidding– If Dream intends to punish him for previous transgressions just before his rescue, Tommy is guilty of a lot worse than a little lying. “I said something I thought would get you to bring Wilbur back so Ghostbur could see the coordinates. So... so the next time you killed Wilbur, he could pass them along to someone living.”

Dream doesn’t say anything, thinking, and that alone is fucking terrifying. “Huh.”

“I s-swear that’s all of it, that’s the truth of it– I didn’t– We didn’t know we could do that before, and we never tried ‘cause not like we had a reason to until we had the coordinates, I promise I wasn’t–”

“I believe you, Tommy,” Dream silences him. “And you know what, I’ve had time to think about everything you did, and really, how can I blame you for trying to escape? Out there, people let you do whatever you want. They spoil you. And you’re a bratty child who would rather get to stay up past your bedtime and eat too much sugar than listen when people tell you what’s best for you.”

Tommy moves to protest, only a moment of wordless stuttering before he falls silent again. *He’s wrong. You know he’s wrong you’re just not allowed to say it or he’ll do something horrible to you.*

“And it’s my job to make sure you stay in line, and I failed, didn’t I?” Dream almost sounds apologetic. “You got out and you ruined your friends’ lives again. Made them upend everything to make sure you were happy, kept an eye on you all the fucking time to make sure you didn’t do anymore damage, right? *I’ve* been doing that this whole time, Tommy! You didn’t need to go bother *them* if that’s what you were looking for. Could’ve just told me you didn’t think you had enough *structure* in your life here. But don’t you worry, Tommy. I’m going to make up for failing last time! And eventually, things will be like they used to be. When you were doing well. You were engaging, you were obedient, you were damn near *helpful* at one point, weren’t you? It’s like I’ve been saying, Tommy. You deserve to have a choice in all of this, but first I need to make sure you’re prepared to make the right one.”

“A choice?” Tommy finally speaks, confused enough to overcome his fears. “But—” He stops. He doesn’t know what retort would be safe or even worth anything.

“Yes, Tommy?” Dream encourages him to speak.

Tommy considers his words carefully. “You said— You said everything was my choice. But you— You said you were gonna— It doesn’t make sense. Because you’re still gonna hurt me if I don’t do what you say. But you said it was my choice.” He stops, feeling flighty panic, unsure if he’s said something wrong. His arguments feel both dangerous and within the confines of what Dream allows him to say. He doesn’t know what Dream will do with it.

“Yeah. I did,” Dream concedes amicably. “I mean, the choice was you do what I say or I hurt Wilbur. And now Wilbur isn’t here, so it’s you do what I say or I hurt *you*. Just like it’s always been,” he laughs. “Oh, and I’ll hurt Wilbur next time I see him too.”

Tommy feels more frantic now. He doesn’t know what he hopes to accomplish, surely not Dream listening and letting him choose to go home, but *something*. Maybe just Dream admitting that Tommy most definitely *doesn’t* have a choice in any of this. “Y-You even said I could stop! When you were taking me you said I could leave.”

“Yeah,” Dream doesn’t mind Tommy’s rising, defensive tone, instead he seems happy to humor him. “And if you did I’d hurt Wilbur. But he’s gone now. So now if you try to leave I’ll hurt you.”

Tommy doesn’t know if he’s more frustrated or anguished. “That’s not— That’s not a *choice*.”

“You seemed to agree when it was Wilbur on the line. What, now because it’s you it’s different? Isn’t that a little selfish?” Dream admonishes him lightly.

“That’s not what it was at all— That’s not true!”

“Sure. Whatever you say, Tommy. You know what, if this is easier for your tiny brain to understand—” Dream leans forward, intent and happy to explain. “*Wilbur* is your free will. How about that? While he’s gone, you don’t have any, and when he’s back, like I said, all of your choices fall back on *him*.”

Tommy doesn't know what's worse, Dream's general threat, or him saying *when* Wilbur is back instead of if.

~

Getting Wilbur back to the mainlands isn't too difficult. He gets dizzy easily and out of breath in minutes, but this is easily solved by Technoblade carrying him like he weighs nothing. Wilbur is far less pleased, being thrown over Techno's shoulder in a firefighter's carry is not helping his definitely concussed head.

"Oh my god, can you— Can you walk a bit steadier? I think I might be sick," Wilbur closes his eyes tightly.

"Don't you dare throw up on me, Wilbur," Techno says warningly.

"Then walk more carefully," Wilbur snaps halfheartedly. The flat bedrock taking up his line of sight seems to dip and spin. "Oh fuck I think I might pass out— You're not— You're not supposed to pass out when you're concussed, right?"

"What makes you say you're concussed?" Sapnap asks.

"Been hit over the head until I fell unconscious like, two or three times in the last few days— Oh fuck put me down put me down put me down—" Wilbur frantically slaps Techno's back.

Technoblade obliges, just in time for Wilbur to puke onto the Nether roof. Technoblade pats Wilbur's back awkwardly.

"F-Fuck..." Wilbur spits, shuddering. "Haven't been sick in like ten years, did you know that?" He stands up straight, immediately grabbing onto Techno's arm to keep standing. "Bit worse than I remember, honestly."

"We're almost back. The main portal isn't much farther," Ranboo nods ahead.

"Okay," Wilbur pauses, frowning. "What happens then?" For some unknowable and cruel reason, Wilbur, Ranboo, and Techno all look to Tubbo.

Tubbo grits his teeth, jaw set and tense. All of them, waiting for him. He hates them. In that moment he fucking hates them for having the fucking audacity to look at him like that, to look at him in a way that makes Tubbo think they're right to—

"We'll need two teams. One to go back and try to work our way back in that forest, circle the ocean, look for another portal. The other one to check for any path from the prison portal, right?" Sapnap has been distracted, typing out on his comm. "Punz isn't up for a mission right now, so, I might ask Bad if he'd go. I know Quackity wants to help but..." Sapnap looks apologetic. "He's not the best fighter, y'know? So we're gonna have to base it on that first. Technoblade, after we get Wilbur back, would you be okay searching the Nether, and I can go back there?" He nods the way they had come.

"Uhhh," Technoblade seems almost surprised. "Yeeaah. I can do that."

“Thanks,” Sapnap gives him a nod. “Uh, Wilbur, you still need carried? We shouldn’t wait around, right?”

Wilbur looks wearily to Technoblade who looks no more enthused by the idea.

“Don’t puke again, okay?” Techno sighs, picking Wilbur up easily.

Wilbur would have loved to keep complaining about the whole undignified affair, but he’s preoccupied keeping his mouth shut.

“We’ll get... someone to look at your head when we get back. I... dunno if Ponk is... back in commission,” Ranboo gives Tubbo a worried look.

“Philza can look at him,” Tubbo says.

Wilbur is instantly distracted from his pain by the thought.

He’s going to see his dad again.

Phil didn’t know what he expected when the party returned. He’d hoped they’d come back with Tommy in tow, but what he gets instead is something impossible as it is kind as it is cruel.

“Wil?!” Phil runs to his son’s side, throwing his arms around him. “Oh my god– You’re– Holy *shit*–” He laughs, bordering on tears.

Wilbur winces on impact, but hugs his father back just as tightly. “Hi, dad,” Wil says softly. He’s doing his best not to break down and cry. *Fuck* does he just want to sob into his father’s arms, to mourn the pain of the past ten years, the cruelty of the past months, and the loss of his little brother.

“Oh my god– How are you– You’re *here*, you’re fucking real and alive!” Phil laughs, squeezing him tightly. His father is relieved. Wilbur cannot resent him for it, but he also knows there is no way he can tell Phil what terrible hurt is consuming him right now. His dad just got him back. Of course he cannot think of pain right now, not with Wilbur fresh out of a grave. So Wilbur does what he always did when he thought Phil would be hurt by what was happening to his son, he lies.

“Ow, *ow*, careful, man, I’m injured,” Wilbur finally pulls away, forcing his tone into something lighter.

“You are?” Phil steps back, poring over him, searching for something to fix.

“Just a little banged up,” Wilbur shrugs. He winces, “actually, no, it’s my fucking head. It’s killing me.”

“Come on, I’ve been running a damn infirmary today, we got Connor and Punz right now,” Phil walks back towards his house. He doesn’t let go of Wilbur’s hand.

“Hey, man!” Connor seems almost unsurprised at the sight of him. “You’re not dead anymore, good on ya! Where’s Tommy, then?”

The joyful reunion is punctured sharply.

Punz, who had looked far more startled at the sight of Wilbur, refocuses. “You couldn’t get him back?”

No one says a word. That’s answer enough.

“I’m gonna go looking,” Sapnap breaks the silence. “You’re hurt, man, so don’t try and come,” he says as Punz moves to speak. “When you’re better you can come if you want.”

Punz concedes, letting Sapnap move ahead, instead distracted by Wilbur’s presence here, but Wilbur hardly notices his staring, far more occupied in the planning to be had.

“I’m coming with you,” Tubbo speaks up. “One of you, I don’t care who Nether or back to that fucking beach, I’m going.”

“I’ll go with you,” Ranboo says.

Sapnap nods. Even if he knows Tubbo definitely has a bigger target on his back should they find Dream, he knows stopping Tubbo from going would be harder than trying to stop a forest fire. “We’re gonna hunt him down. I know we can do this.”

“Tubbo,” Wilbur grabs Tubbo’s sleeve as he heads for the door. Tubbo stops, staring at him, waiting. Wilbur struggles with a single thing to say. “Y’know,” Wilbur buries the fear rising in the back of his throat like a scream. “Get him home safe.”

Tubbo nods, and then he’s gone.

Maybe Wilbur is delusional as he was in death, but he feels they have an unspoken agreement, even if Tubbo has given no indication of it. *If we can’t get Tommy back, you need to kill me. So he won’t be alone.*

~

“Come on. Might as well get things moving,” Dream drags him out of his chair. “Okay, most of this place you’re gonna get free range of, but there are some rooms you can’t know the location of,” Dream ties a blindfold around Tommy’s eyes, the same he had blinded Wilbur with mere hours ago.

“W-What do you mean?” Tommy immediately feels sharp panic, but he doesn’t try to remove it. He knows he’s not allowed and that’s about as good as his hands being bound to stop him from trying. Tommy is still terrified. He doesn’t like not knowing what’s going on. He scrambles for something to hold onto, clinging to Dream’s arm.

“Just don’t look for a minute,” Dream guides him forward, Tommy brushing against the stone wall and flinching closer beside him. It’s too familiar a habit, clinging to Dream like he’s his

only guide in the darkness. He hears the stone break and shift, then he's pushed forward, the stone is replaced and Dream removes the blindfold.

It's a small room lit by a single torch, a bubbling pool of water against the far wall. Dream holds out a pearl. "You know the drill."

Tommy doesn't know what he expected. He stares down at the pool of water with something between irritation, disgust, and horror. Of course. This was always how it was going to fucking go, right? He came back, and Dream would pick up right where they left off.

"Come on, Tommy. Why're you putting it off? What, we're just gonna stand here for an hour?"

Tommy throws the pearl, letting bitter anger settle in his gut instead of hopelessness, or really, *with* his utter hopelessness.

"Alright, blindfold goes back on. Just for a minute. You just can't know where the stasis chamber is, okay?"

Tommy doesn't both replying, he's so tired, so he just lets Dream steer him back into the corridor for a ways before taking off the blindfold. This stretch of corridor looks identical to all the rest. Narrow, dark, lit by sea lanterns embedded into the bottom of the walls at semi-regular intervals. Tommy hears something. It can't be— That had been one of his greatest losses, Dream can't actually be giving him that back—

Dream turns into a small alcove, two iron doors marking off a brightly lit room. It smells like outside.

The room is large, the ceilings still low, but the room stretches back, cut deep into the stone, chaotic and brightly lit by glowstone. Rows of plants take up its center, but at the back is what's of real interest to Tommy. The chatter of chickens echoes against stone. There's a small pen for them set up there. The whole setup feels almost industrial in nature, purely a food source, far from a loving garden or replica of the outside world, but still far more than Tommy might have expected from Dream.

"I was thinking— again, we've got the stasis chamber set up, I'll let you be a bit more free range, *you* could take care of this stuff for me. How about that? Growing your own food, taking care of the chickens, thought it might help you keep your head on straight," Dream puts a gentle hand on his shoulder, a mimicry of caring. It unnerves Tommy far more than whatever threats Dream has made so far.

Tommy nods. Dream doesn't list this place as a reward or something he in any way has to earn. That scares him. It's *wrong*. There has to be a catch. There always is.

"Okay, but *you're* responsible for them, Tommy, okay? Just like with Wilbur. So I want you to take good care of them," Dream is so fucking patronizing, there's little threat in his tone, but Tommy gets the message with an ache in his chest. Dream gave him animals for a reason. It all comes back to the same thing— Tommy and his *attachments*.

“Okay?” Dream doesn’t care about what he has said sending Tommy reeling, he still expects a reply.

“Okay,” Tommy says hoarsely. He resolutely stares down at the patch of potatoes in front of him. It’s something that doesn’t feel pain.

“Good! Now, I’ll show you where you’re gonna be staying,” Dream pulls him back into the corridor. It is a single long stretch, the room with the farm further back than the room he had woken up in, and far ahead is a slightly brighter light. The walls are too fucking close, it’s too dark, their footsteps echo too sharply. Tommy stumbles after Dream, gait unsteady so he keeps brushing against the damp stone walls and flinching. It’s all too close. Dream turns off into a side corridor before then. “You and Wilbur are gonna be neighbors, of course. And maybe if you’re good, I’ll let you two live together or something,” Dream nods through a doorway.

The cell is almost identical to the one he had lived in prior. The difference being the furniture was kept on wooden platforms to keep it from the damp and the ceiling is lower. It all feels horribly smaller. Tommy was claustrophobic enough from the narrowness of the corridor, but *every* fucking room had low ceilings. It’s suffocating. Tommy’s heart beats a little faster. It’s getting just a bit harder to breathe.

“Now, this is where you stay if you’re good. But it’s the same as it was last time, if you fuck up, you don’t get to stay somewhere nice, got it?” Dream says warningly. Tommy gets the message. There’s a dark cell somewhere here too. Tommy nods.

“Alright, one more stop. This room is my favorite,” Dream’s excitement sets his teeth on edge.

Dream continues down the narrow, dark corridor toward the brighter light at the very end of the corridor. “You’re gonna love this, Tommy,” Dream steps out into the room with a skip in his step. “Isn’t this a fucking cool base?” Dream gestures grandly to the space.

Tommy enters just behind him, stopping, staring, mouth hanging open slightly as he’s made to feel so impossibly small. It’s a massive glass dome above them, through it is only a thick, inky blackness. Tommy cannot comprehend it for a moment, trying to fathom where he is. For a moment he can only panickedly think of the black void he’s heard horror stories of, of the emptiness beneath the world, but then something in the darkness glows.

Tommy steps forward, unable to bury at least a little awe. Glow squids make themselves known, drifting over the glass, a soft, pale blue light fighting away a shred of that darkness, their light matching the pale sea lanterns dotting the floor below Tommy’s feet. They’re under water. They’re *deep* under water, and as far as he can tell, from the occasional shadows the glow squids find as they swim, they’re in a *cave*. A massive, underwater cave with no indication of a surface.

“So, what’d you think?” Dream sounds far too pleased, the eagerness of a child showing off a drawing.

Tommy doesn't want to offer praise, however intriguing he may find it, so he settles on a question. "Why?"

"What do you mean *why*?" Dream sounds irritated, like he was hoping for more.

Tommy doesn't stop looking up, not merely captivated by the glow squids outside, but by the glass dome itself. Such a simple thing keeping a million gallons of pressure off of them. It's the only room with a ceiling higher than two blocks, likely because of how much water covers the floor, that's insurance enough. The water is deeper here. Not just shallow puddles, but the entire floor is covered in enough water that it half covers his feet. The size of the dome doesn't matter. The room feels as suffocating as the rest, if not more. All of that water, all of that weight bearing down on them, surrounding and suffocating and it's all just *crushing him*. He keeps talking. He doesn't know why he thinks knowing will help, but he asks anyway. "Why here?"

"Well, no Endermen, for one, and for another thing..." Dream sounds smug again, walking forward to a ladder set into the wall leading up to an iron trap door leading into the water. At its base, there is an Enderchest. "Do you want to know how you leave this place? There isn't a Nether portal anywhere in this base."

"...How?" Tommy watches him cautiously.

"You swim," Dream turns back, holding a water breathing potion. "This is the only time you're going to see me holding one of these. There are no brewing stands or other potions in this entire base. Might get annoying for you at some point, no way to make health pots, although maybe if I'm feeling generous I'll bring one. There is *one* water breathing potion kept only in my Enderchest at all times," Dream turns around, returning the potion to his Enderchest. "And without that, you'll drown before you can reach the surface. Do you understand, Tommy? The only way out is in *my* Enderchest. That's that. You try to leave, you drown. You're good at that, aren't you?" Dream leans back against the Enderchest, proud and self satisfied.

Tommy realizes what the dome reminds him of.

It's as though he's standing in the base of one big, flooded apiary.

He thinks of a bee caught in a rain storm, drowning outside of the glass, too weighted to fly. That's what an apiary is for. To keep the bees safe.

That doesn't make it any less of a cage.

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

CW: abuse and suicidal thoughts

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Punz resists the urge to bombard Wilbur with questions. That's not how he would act normally, and since Wilbur isn't at his throat, there clearly isn't much suspicion to worry about there. And poor Connor— He hadn't *really* seen anything. He'd been dead before he hit the ground, he'd never had any indication of Punz working with Dream and it seems he's fallen for Punz's little sob story about just trying to get Tommy somewhere safe with ease. This is the part where he bows out, if he wants information, he has a better place to get it, and if he's honest, he has no fucking clue what Dream is playing at *sending Wilbur back out*.

"I think I'm gonna go home," Punz stands, a hand going to his side as his ribs protest at the movement just as his leg threatens to give out. *Fuck*, that hurt. "Phil, can I have another health pot for the road?"

"Yeah, yeah sure, mate, do you want someone to walk you? I can look for... I dunno, an old sword for you to use as a walking stick or something?" Phil passes him the potion.

"What happened?" Wilbur has been staring at the floor like a man at the foot of a deathbed, waiting only for bad news, but now he looks up, noting Punz's injuries.

"Dream. What else?" Punz says flatly. "Look, I'm tired, Connor can fill you in on the rest."

"I'm tired too! I'm the one who *died* today," Connor says.

"Fuck, I'm sorry about that too, man. I could've... acted faster, I dunno," Punz sighs.

"Hey, quit beating yourself up. We were all a little thrown off by that, huh? I'm just glad you like, tried to stay with Tommy or whatever. I dunno," Connor shrugs.

"You did?" Wilbur stares between the both of them. "I'm sorry, I know— I know you're tired, but please." He stares at him, something far too vulnerable and desperate behind his eyes. He doesn't even offer a question, he just looks at Punz, thinks of Tommy, and says *please*.

It unnerves Punz a bit. "I was the one watching him. When—" Punz stops with an appropriately heavy sigh. "When Dream showed up. Killed Connor. Shot me in the leg before I could take a step and kept me down with this," he gestures bitterly to the bandages wrapped around his torso.

“And what did you do?” Wilbur isn’t pitying. Not like the others. He’s *still* desperate, but now he’s sharp too.

Punz stares at him, irritated. “Besides... bleeding out?” He says coldly.

“No, before then. Okay, he shot you in the leg. What the fuck were you doing when he had to switch over to his sword?” Wilbur sounds like he’s trying his best to cut Punz open again with his words, and for a moment of genuine fear, only a *moment*, Punz thinks maybe he *does* know something. Some indication of Punz’s loyalties that had slipped through the cracks, despite Punz’s avid efforts to avoid Wilbur’s cell on his visits to Dream’s little hideaway. But that look in Wilbur’s eyes... it’s not *suspicion*. He’s wholeheartedly and furiously accusing Tommy’s protector of not doing enough, no treachery needed.

“Wilbur,” Phil is as scolding as he can manage when he’s treating his undead son like glass.

“No, it’s fine,” Punz keeps his voice steady, calm, but he cuts out that self pitying bullshit, that dramatic guilt of *oh if only I could have done more*, that might work on Connor, even on Phil, but not Wilbur. He doesn’t know the man well, but he knows something of him from his louder acts. Wilbur knows theatrics are bullshit because that’s all he was ever good at. Punz is good at his job too. “I’ll go through this step by step for you, Wilbur. And I *mean* step by step. Just to get you caught up on the amount of wasted efforts have gone into trying to keep Tommy safe, okay?” Punz puts out a hand as if to tell Wilbur to hold that thought, because he’s not stopping. “See, Sapnap has been planning patrols to look for Dream *constantly*, and somehow I have gotten myself roped into it. We run into Ponk and Sam— You know, Sam hasn’t left Ponk’s side since the rescue and he was very much right to, because *he’s* made the mistake of working for Dream in the past and got a target put on his back for failing him, so Dream shoots Ponk. Dream shows up right there,” Punz points out the front windows toward the aquarium tunnel. “And Tommy is also nearby, of course. With Tubbo, obviously, because Tubbo has been watching Tommy like a hawk since he got back. Along with the night shifts we’ve all been taking to keep Tommy safe. But Tubbo— honestly reasonably, needs to go after Dream. Kill him, kill the problem, right? And Sapnap has already taken off, and Sam is freaking out because Ponk is fucking *shot*, so *I* offer to look after Tommy. Easy, right? Dream went the other way, and we are surrounded by other people. Sure, Sam is occupied but he’s a good fighter. Ranboo, I don’t know, but the kid seems tough enough, and Phil is right there too. I almost feel ornamental, he’s so safe.”

Punz laughs, sarcasm with a hint of viciousness. “And you know what our *dear* Tommy does? Tommy, who every bleeding heart on the server has been slaving away to protect? This kid *runs away*. He bolts, and maybe I should’ve known right then the job was more trouble than it’s worth. And Sam is currently busy getting *covered* in Ponk’s blood, but that sweetheart looks like he wants to follow him, but obviously he should stay with Ponk, so *I* say I’ll go after him. Bring him back— It should be easy, right? So I head toward Tommy’s house. And I’m right. He’s there, freaking out. And I make my first mistake. Tommy doesn’t want to go back, he wants me to leave him alone, etcetera etcetera, typical poor terrified Tommy shit. And I humor him. I don’t leave, obviously, but I don’t take Tommy back the way we’d come, I think, oh, the smart thing to do is to work our way around. Tommy didn’t want to go back to Phil’s, so I was thinking maybe we’d hide out by the docks

or Niki's old place or something, but first I try to get us away from the main path and here comes *Connor*, who it is *not* my job to protect. He's a liability— no offense—”

“None taken?”

“—so I basically tell him to fuck off. He doesn't. I keep moving. And we find ourselves outside of the prison. And Connor gets in my way. So we are *not* moving. And then Dream arrives. Dream who is *supposed* to be on the other side of the fucking server getting beaten up by Sapnap and Tubbo. But no. First he comes around the corner, out by the prison, after I have spent the last five minutes bickering with Connor over letting me take Tommy somewhere. So instead of looking out for Dream, my whole job, I am looking at *him*. That's my next mistake, right? *That* mistake is what got Connor an axe to the neck. Dream leaves his axe and has his crossbow out. He is out of range of me. I have my sword and I get to take *one* step forward. Dream shoots me in the leg, it starts to give out, and I make another mistake. Okay? I already had my sword out, I could've swung at him,” Punz smiles, sharp and bitter, this time the facade has nothing mournful, only a cold assessment of his own work. “And I grabbed Tommy. Okay? I had a split second, and in years of cold hard training to be one of the best goddamn mercenaries on this server instead of swinging my sword, protecting my bad side, all the practical things I have done my whole life, I got stupid. I got emotional and my first instinct was to grab Tommy and try to pull him back.” Punz sees it change. The look in Wilbur's eyes— not pitying or accommodating in any way, but a change nonetheless.

Punz finishes strong. “So yeah. Dream got to take a cheap shot between my ribs. And for that, Wilbur, I am sorry. I really am. So if you have to know, those were my mistakes. And that is why I had to lay there on the fucking ground while Tommy walked out of there with Dream. And yeah, I failed, and this part won't make you feel better, Wilbur, but even then, at least I fought harder than Tommy did. Tommy has been protected for weeks and it's on *my* watch he decides to make it harder every step of the way. Is *that* what you wanted to hear?”

Wilbur falls for it. Hook, line, and sinker. It's something unkind and cruel and maybe a bit too close to home for the self loathing former president, *that* Wilbur will believe.

Wilbur shakes his head with the morbid, fanatical smile of a grieving man. His voice tremors. “You're right. Doesn't— It doesn't make me feel better.” He laughs, something more like a sob. “You should've fought harder.”

“Yeah. Well, not like I can do anything for him now. So, if you don't mind, I'd like to go home and rest without the company of a miserable asshole looking for a target— sorry, a target other than *himself*. Your projection could use some subtlety, Wilbur. Best of luck to you all.” With that last snide comment, again, just cruel enough to be trusted— and maybe Punz gets a little satisfaction from it as well— he leaves them to it.

Wilbur watches Punz leave with full acceptance. He knows his scolding Punz for *not fighting hard enough* is inane considering it's not like *he* did any better.

“Wil? Can I have a look at your head?” Phil says gently.

“What? Oh, yeah right,” Wilbur grudgingly leans forward. “Ow, fuck—”

“Sorry, just hold still, mate,” Phil winces sympathetically. “You wanna take off your coat? I’m gonna try and get some of the blood out of your hair.”

“Doesn’t matter I’ve been damp for weeks.”

Connor laughs, reminding Wilbur of his presence.

“You alright?”

“Huh? Me?” Connor seems surprised.

“Yeah, *you*—” Wilbur stops with a gasp as cool water pours down his head.

“Sorry, sorry you said it didn’t matter!” Phil fusses over him. “Don’t think you’ll need stitches, that’s something.”

“Lucky me,” Wilbur sighs. “And yeah, Connor, you fucking died today. So, you alright?”

“Yeah! Yeah, it was pretty quick. So,” Connor shrugs it off, a hand going to the raised scar across his neck. “I... I guess I just feel bad about Tommy. Like, *last* time I wait too long to say stuff, and that ended up being bad for him. And *this* time I thought ‘you know what. If he seems all freaked out, this time I’ll stay with him. Make sure he’s okay,’ and I *tried* to do that, and I think I ended up making it worse. Like. Tommy looked like he was gonna puke or something, and Punz was basically forcing him to keep moving, so I got all bitchy and tried to cut him off. I dunno what I was thinking. Even if Punz was being pushy it was because Tommy seemed like, shell shocked or something. He wasn’t like, *bullying Tommy*.” Connor sighs. “Stupid of me. So. I’m sorry too.”

“What do you mean last time?” Wilbur turns reproachful as Connor’s words catch up to him.

“Oh— Yeah, so. *Forever* ago I saw Dream revive Tommy. When the whole server thought he was dead? That time? And I was like, holy shit! Tommy’s not dead! Why’s he sneaking around, right? And like, it was probably like 2 am or something I was barely fucking awake. He’s like, talking to Dream about something, Dream helps him up, and they start leaving. And I just sorta went ‘okay looks like Tommy just faked his death good for him.’ And didn’t tell anyone, because like. Clearly Tommy didn’t want anyone to find out. He walked out of there with Dream when he could’ve gone to L’Manberg or whatever. And *now* I know he’d been... I guess brainwashed? I don’t know it’s not all really clear to me, but when I thought I was just letting a guy fake his death I was actually like, helping this *other* guy get away with kidnapping a kid. So,” Connor nods solemnly. “I fucked up. And I think about it a lot. And then this time I tried to help him and it didn’t do shit. So.”

Wilbur looks for the coldness that had come to him when Punz had said his piece and finds he doesn’t have any anger left. Not for this poor bastard who had never had a job to do or someone to protect. Maybe later he’ll think about it more, think about what Connor getting his head out of his ass sooner could’ve prevented, but right now the only person worthy of scorn is himself. He’d known what his task had been and had had the opportunity, and when it came down to it, he just wasn’t strong enough. The only reason he hasn’t left to find a ledge to throw himself off of is Phil’s incessant worrying over his shoulder. He misses when

it had just been Tommy he had to try to protect. He's back among the living and all that is is a dozen more people for him to fail.

"I think I'm gonna go sit outside. I haven't... it's been a long time since I've been outside," Wilbur stands unsteadily.

"Yeah, sure. Want me to come with you?" Phil hovers, looking like he wants to help Wilbur stand.

"No. I just— I just need some time," Wilbur presses a hand to his eyes as the room still tilts. He focuses on keeping steady and makes it out the door. He stops at the edge of one of the platforms, in this strange, new world they'd pieced together on top of the crater he had left them with. Wilbur had brought them all that pain, all that destruction, and now he has the luxury of sitting on top of his reckoning, alive and well. There's water filling the crater. Tiny, darkly colored fish flit through the shadows underneath. Wilbur can smell the water. He feels wind tugging gently at his hair and the shadows of clouds shift and change to occasional sunbeams. Wilbur tucks his knees into his chest, grabbing fistfuls of his hair, eyes shut tight. He doesn't know what right he has to cry when he's the one that made it out.

~

Punz's story had been a careful web of half-truths. The irritation was true. Punz had done his job *perfectly* and Dream rewards him by freeing one of their lab rats. *Dream* had been the one insisting they needed *both*, they just *had* to get Tommy to test the revive book on *two* subjects and of course now that he *has* Tommy he changes his mind. Punz does return to his home, but not to rest.

You whisper to Dream: stasis?

Dream doesn't reply, but in a moment Punz feels that familiar jolt in his stomach of falling through space before he hits the trap door, pain shuddering through his wounded leg.

"Everything good back on the Mainlands?" Dream helps him steady, a hand on his arm. Punz was supposed to stay there and keep an eye on things. Dream assumes something went wrong for him to come back so soon. To be fair, something *had* gone wrong.

"Yeah," Punz brushes Dream off irritably. "Except, it was weird, everything was going to plan, the hunters *I* saved your ass from came back, but they weren't empty handed, huh? No, *Wilbur fucking Soot* comes walking back into town— And I thought to myself— hey, that's weird! He's supposed to be *in a fucking cell, a hundred blocks under water, where he can't tell anyone fucking anything!*" Injured or not, Punz shoves Dream back into the wall, his shouts echoing through the dome.

There's a splash in the water on the other side of the room. Punz turns around sharply, about to go for his sword, but instead he sees Tommy, standing just inside the doorway, staring at him, looking almost *impressed*.

"What's... what the hell is he doing out?!" Punz isn't shouting anymore, still sharp, still irritated, but unnerved as well. He'd easily avoided Wilbur who had been confined to a cell

at all times, but *this*? Considering his participation in Tommy's abduction, he can't help but feel like Tommy isn't supposed to be here. Not where Punz has to see him at least.

"It's not like he can go anywhere," Dream scoffs.

"So you're just letting him *wander around the base*?!" Punz asks incredulously.

"What's your fucking problem, then?!" It's *Tommy* who replies because of fucking course it is.

"Does he know where his room is?" Punz keeps talking to Dream, staring at that mask instead of the kid behind him.

"Yeah. I already gave him the grand tour," Dream has the audacity to sound amused.

"Go there, then, Tommy," Punz turns back, pointing in the other direction of the hall.

Tommy doesn't move. He glances between Punz and Dream, waiting.

"Yeah, go," Dream waves him off.

Tommy gives Punz an almost taunting look, eyebrows raised, a poorly buried smirk. Waiting for Dream's orders is as close to telling Punz he isn't the boss of him as he can get.

"And hey, when Punz asks you to do something, you do it," Dream adds.

Tommy scowls. Still, he's quick to make his exit while he has the chance.

"I don't need you to defend me from a teenager," Punz snaps.

"What, were *you* gonna go over there and actually hit him to make him listen to you? Because that's what you'd have to do," Dream says it like a challenge, a test of Punz's willpower.

Punz buries the urge to snap back: *I could have done that if you'd given me the chance*, but the truth of it was he hadn't made any move towards Tommy, he'd just stood there and let Tommy look smug. "...You still screwed me over— don't change the subject."

Dream scoffs, brushing him off. "Okay, I can see you're mad—"

"*Mad*? Oh, do I seem *mad* to you, Dream?! What gave you that idea— Maybe it's because *you* just decided to put me at risk— and for what?!" Punz steps forward, jabbing an accusing finger against Dream's chest. "*You* were the one who said we needed them both! That was your fucking excuse for me helping you play your little mind games, sneaking around all of Tommy's little guards, and the moment you get your fucking way you let Wilbur *go*?!" Punz can't help it, he shoves Dream back again. He *knows* Dream won't be afraid to hit back, Punz injured or not, but he's so fucking tired of Dream's shit. "Do you forget *I* am the one who had to run in and save your ass when your *starving unarmed prisoner* managed to get you on the ground?! Maybe I'm fucking *mad* Dream because you gave me *no warning* about

this little part of your plan and we had *no* fucking insurance that he didn't see me before he blacked out, how about that, Dream?!"

"...And did he see you? Did he say anything?" Is all Dream says, without any anger, maybe mild interest.

It's fucking infuriating. "No! No, as far as I can tell, he didn't see shit. Got on my case about losing Tommy, but no. If he knows, he's stronger than I thought. I don't think he would've been able to restrain himself if he thought I'd helped take him. You know what they're like," Punz finally steps back.

"Well, then no harm no foul, right?" Dream shrugs.

"Fuck you, man."

"Look, I'm *sorry* I didn't tell you," Dream saunters over. "Things changed, opportunities presented themselves."

"*Opportunities?* What do you mean opportunities presented themselves?"

"I got rid of the lodestone, sent those idiots on a wild goose chase, and now Wilbur is out there to keep them occupied with all of his bullshit, right?"

"Explain. Explain *better*."

Dream sighs, leaning against the glass. "Okay, fine. I gave Wilbur the Lodestone. Tubbo found him instead."

"So? You could've just dumped it somewhere. Or broken it. Attached it to a mob or something send them chasing after that."

"Tell me, Punz. Right now, according to all those poor desperate people back in L'Manberg, what is their best connection to find Tommy?"

Punz eyes him warily. "...Wilbur?"

"Yes, *Wilbur*. And tell me, Punz, what would *you* think if your enemy took someone and let another prisoner go?"

"...There was a trade."

"Right again! And between Wilbur and Tommy, who does L'Manberg like more?"

"Tommy."

"And if instead you got the annoying, manipulative guy who blew up your nation, who appears out of the woods, clearly misleading you by design, would you trust that person?"

"No."

“See, Punz? Now, when you tell me what those little pawns are up to, if they start noticing a certain *trend*, who is the last person who had a connection with the *evil monster Dream* that’s been terrorizing them?”

“Wilbur,” Punz’s anger has faded to irritation.

“Exactly. *Not you*, but Wilbur. Sure, they might not blame him for it, probably assume it’s to protect poor little Tommy, but they won’t go pointing fingers at you. Not for a while, at least. In the list of targets they might wager is working with me, I mean, Sapnap would make the list, probably. Then maybe Sam. I mean, he built me the prison, and I shot *Ponk*, not him.”

“Connor. I’ve been trying to push the idea that it might be Connor.”

“Wait, really?” Dream sounds delighted.

“Yeah. He saw you revive Tommy and didn’t say anything, and he was there when you took him last time.”

Dream laughs, sharp and wheezing. “Oh my god! That’s perfect. See if you can keep doing that. Connor getting arrested or something from getting accused of working with *me*. That would be so funny.”

“Okay– Let’s say I believe you let Wilbur go as some clever plan to keep my cover– *you* were the one saying we needed both of them,” Punz is still reproachful. “I have spent *weeks* sneaking around helping you scare that kid all so he wouldn’t put up a fight. It’s fucking insane. You could’ve grabbed him at the very start when I said I spotted you by L’Manberg! And you– what, you *talked* to him? Tommy *can’t* put up a fight. And if not him– you could’ve taken literally anyone on the server, like, you could’ve taken someone who wouldn’t have been missed. Like... I mean, like *Connor* for instance!”

“All of my research so far has been using Tommy. It’s important to be consistent.”

Punz eyes him doubtfully. “...Right.”

“And yeah, letting Wilbur go was a bit of a spur of the moment decision, but it’s not *permanent*. You think that idiot is going to stay out there knowing I have Tommy *here*? These people– It’s too *easy*. Their attachments make them weak. Wilbur, with all of his self loathing bullshit, I’d bet he’ll kill himself by the end of the week and tell Tommy he’s coming to help him.”

Punz mulls this over, pacing the dome, the water splashes annoyingly. “Okay, fine. I still think you’re a dick, but fine. I–” He stops, irritation returning sharply at the outline of a figure trying to make himself small and hidden in the shadows of the corridor. There’s nowhere really for him to hide, but Punz has to give Tommy some credit. He’d managed to go unnoticed in the darkness between sea lanterns this long.

Dream follows his gaze. He moves carefully along the wall, keeping out of sight of the doorway. Punz is surprised Tommy can’t hear him coming, but the sound of the water must

echo, it's hard to follow. Tommy yelps as Dream drags him back out by the hair.

“Having fun there, Tommy?” Dream forces Tommy to look at him. “I let you have full run of the base and *this* is how you repay me?!” He tugs on Tommy’s hair until he cries out to emphasize his point.

“L-Let me go– I’ll go I–”

“*Arguing*, now? Really? What the hell has gotten into you? Have you really forgotten everything I’ve taught you?” Dream turns scolding. Then he turns to Punz, throwing Tommy at his feet. “Will you do the honors? You’re the one that told him to leave. He disobeyed you.”

Tommy scrambles back, putting some distance between them but the only other option is getting in reach of Dream so he stops. He looks up at Punz, not quite scared, but wary. This is a test. From both Dream and Tommy. Punz doesn’t see why it should matter who does it. Tommy hits the ground with a split and bloody lip either way.

Chapter End Notes

Punz sure is a guy huh. I'm usually pretty good at copying the mannerisms of the characters but I don't have much to go off of here so idk if Punz sounds like Punz just roll with it for me lmao

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

CW: graphic discussion of suicide, violence, temporary character death.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tommy paces his cell erratically, lip still swollen and a bruise forming along his chin. His footsteps echo differently here, the wet floors are irritating. The cell is fucking smaller. His old cell, ten paces from the back of the room to the front. This one, eight. It's fucking infuriating. Tommy keeps hitting the wall by mistake.

"Fuck!" Tommy stubs his toe again, punching the wall even as it scrapes his knuckles. He turns around, shaking out his hands and putting them just in front of him so hopefully they'll hit the wall first.

"Okay Tommy, how do you want to play this, eh? Because you feel like you're about to lose your FUCKING MIND already!" Tommy gestures furiously, tugging on his hair before he flinches at the wall coming to meet him and turns around sharply. "Do you go nuts until Dream beats some sense into you or do try to keep your fucking mouth shut? HA like playing it safe has ever fucking worked— well except when it does work and you feel like you escape something fucking awful by the skin of your teeth. Have you forgotten how bad it gets Tommy?!" He flinches away from the wall and turns around. "Because right now your stupid fucked up brain wants to find Dream and attack him until you can't move anymore— pain isn't temporary. You're thinking- oh, just get beat and then it's over! But the pain FUCKING LASTS Tommy, bruises take days and cuts even longer and all that piled on top of whatever else— the dark cell!" Tommy laughs hysterically, voice high and hoarse. "You want to go there?! So why the fuck do you STILL WANT TO TEAR HIM APART!" Tommy screams himself hoarse, his voice echoing back against him, shrill and almost painful. "Who gives a shit if Dream hears—"

Tommy bites down on his knuckles just to feel something, hitting his forehead until it feels like he can breathe again. "Okay, okay think- what do you know? What do you fucking know? It's fucking Punz, isn't it? Fucking PUNZ! That lying fucking bastard!" Tommy throws himself against the sealed over wall until he can't catch his breath and has to stop. "From the fucking beginning, yeah? He— he's the one that said Dream was by L'Manberg. Bet that fucker stole Wilbur's body from the community house before I could get it! A-And maybe— oh," Tommy bites down on his knuckles again, something between a whimper and a laugh smothered by it. "Those nights you thought *he* was watching— you don't know! Right?! You don't know! Could've been FUCKING PUNZ!"

Tommy laughs. "And— and you got stupid! You got *stu-pid*, didn't you, Tommy?! You didn't make a stasis chamber, because even if they could pull you out, Wilbur is still trapped

but *nooo* Wilbur is *not* fucking trapped, and you've lost your chance! But say you did have a stasis chamber, unless they found it and pulled you back when you first got here it wouldn't even fucking matter because Dream has got you in one too and he'd just take you back first. Maybe you'd— Maybe you'd have the chance to set it up again before Dream pulled you back and then they'd save you before he could make you do it again! Oh, what the fuck it doesn't fucking *matter* because you didn't, did you? And now you're fucking stuck here with a fucked up bastard and *another* MINI fucked up bastard!"

Punz has yet to make the journey back to the mainlands. His leg is still killing him and he isn't really feeling up for a swim right now. He can hear Tommy screaming through the walls.

"The fuck—" Punz glances down the hallway. "Uhh, does Tommy seem a little nuts to you?"

"Huh? Tommy?" Dream has been writing in that book of his. "Oh, oh yeah. No. You have no idea what a crazy Tommy looks like. You don't wanna know," Dream shakes his head. "Fucking creepy."

Punz ignores the questions that alone raises. "Now what?" Punz asks. "Do I get to see your notes or what?"

"What?" Dream turns sharp and defensive, snapping the journal shut. "No. No, these aren't just research, it's— it's personal."

Punz scoffs. "What, you've got a diary?"

"Shut up. We're business partners, you only get what's part of our arrangement. You're lucky I'm letting you in this at all," Dream snaps.

"Okay, then, *partner*," Punz says sarcastically. "What next, then? You know I haven't actually *seen* anyone revived. I know it's happened, because Tommy is here, but I want to see it."

"I'll do you one better," Dream stands. "Do you want to do it?"

"What?"

Dream turns back to look at him and Punz doesn't need to see his face to know he's amused. "If you're feeling up to it, wanna bring Tommy back to life?"

Punz's first reply is stupid and impulsive. "But Tommy's not dead."

Dream laughs. "Don't worry. There are a lot of ways to fix that."

Tommy keeps pacing. "Oh that fucking asshole— playing along all the while— oh my god—" Tommy almost cackles, "you gave him the rest of your fucking diamonds! You *paid him* to do what was already his fucking job—" Tommy cuts himself off with a scream as the wall opens with a hum of red stone.

“Whoa, there, Tommy. You’re getting yourself all worked up,” Dream reaches out a hand, as if to calm him.

“Shut the fuck up!” Tommy snarls hoarsely. Tommy claps his hands over his mouth, stumbling back. “I’m sorry,” Tommy says softly. “I’m so fucking sorry I dunno, I–“

“It’s okay, Tommy,” Dream is quick to reassure him, nudging Punz, like they share a joke, like the two of them are school bullies and not captors. “You’re not yourself right now. That’s okay, you’ll get back into the swing of things.”

“What does–“ Tommy glances between them frantically. Dream is right, he’s worked himself into a panic. Tommy isn’t used to being trapped lately. “What does that mean?”

“Come on. Let’s show Punz here what you’ve learned,” Dream nods him back out into the corridor, guiding him back toward the dome.

“What I’ve…” Tommy mutters hoarsely. “What?”

“Stand there, Tommy,” Dream pulls him into the middle of the room, offering him something. “Punz hasn’t seen a revival yet. And I’m sure you remember what the first step of that is, right?”

Tommy glances down. Dream is offering him a knife. Tommy accepts it with trembling hands. *The jugular. Go on, do it. Between his helmet and his chest plate, catch him in the fucking neck–*

Dream steps away before Tommy can commit. “Go on, then,” he nods encouragingly. “Kill yourself.”

“What?” Tommy stares at the shining metal in his hand. “I haven’t– I haven’t done it with a knife before, Dream.” Tommy is no longer in hysterics, but his hesitant logic like this somehow makes any sense unnerves Punz as much as the screaming. “I can’t do that. Please can I– can I drown instead?” Tommy glances to the glass dome.

“No, Tommy,” Dream says scoldingly. “We’re not going to go fish out your body. I’m telling you to kill yourself with that knife. So, go.”

Tommy struggles to think. “I dunno if I…” Tommy hesitantly raises the knife to his throat before stopping. “I only think I can manage the wrists,” he frowns, looking carefully from the blade to his own flesh, “and bleeding out that way is slow.”

“Well, I’d figure it out fast. I want you dead,” Dream tilts back on his heels, teasing him now. “So make it happen, or I’ll do it. And trust me, it’ll be a lot worse than just slow.”

“I d-don’t– I can’t, I don’t think I can!” Tommy turns hysterical again. “I just– I don’t think I–“ Tommy holds the knife over his chest, but he cannot plunge a dagger into his own heart. Human nature is still a stubborn thing however hard Dream has tried to take it from him.

Dream sighs, looking to Punz as if they shared some mutual annoyance, but Punz is far more focused on the fact that everything about this feels fucking unnatural.

“Okay, Tommy, I’ll help you,” Dream says it like he’s doing him a favor, even as he pulls out his crossbow. “But like I said, it won’t be easy for you.”

Tommy doesn’t even scream when his leg gives out, a bolt through his knee, just this weak sort of gasp. Punz’s own injured leg twinges at the sight.

“Your turn.”

“What?” Punz stares at Dream, startled as that mask turns to him.

“Go on. Shoot him. Wherever you want it doesn’t have to be fatal. We put enough arrows in him, he’ll stop moving eventually, right?” Dream laughs. Punz doesn’t. “Aw, come on, it’s a joke. It’s a little funny.”

Dream is challenging him again. Punz already hesitated too long once, but he’s not here to appease Dream or make Dream think he’s strong enough, but there still is that irritating pressure to ensure Dream knows Punz is still a threat.

“Can you make it quick? He won’t, but if you– if you could shoot me in the chest. In the lungs would help. I could drown then. Or– or if not can you at least get me in the spine so it doesn’t hurt so bad? Please, Punz, I’m sorry I can’t do it I dunno why so please, just–“

It takes hearing his name to realize Tommy’s frantic babbling is directed at him. Tommy stares at him, pleading, waiting. Punz doesn’t move so Tommy instead looks to the bolt through his leg. He tries to pull it through the rest of the way, stopping quickly with a whimper, hands shaking. “F-Fuck,” Tommy pauses before taking ahold of the bolt again, gearing himself up. His blood has already begun to spread through the water.

“Really?” Dream gives Punz a doubtful look. “Fine, dunno what I expected. You’ve gotten so squeamish lately,” he shrugs, reloading a bolt. “I’m thinking taking out the other knee, y’know so it’s even–“

Dream doesn’t get the chance. Punz levels his crossbow with Tommy’s head. Tommy is still looking down, still fumbling with the bolt already through his leg. Punz fires.

“Aw,” Dream pouts, lowering his crossbow. “You’re no fun.”

Punz doesn’t look at him. His focus remains on the body now collapsed forward, blood pooling, the red less dramatic diluted by saltwater, but it still spreads too far out. Close enough to reach his Netherite boots. It must have burned, Punz thinks. When his leg gave out and hit the water.

Dream sighs. “We’ll leave him dead for an hour. He didn’t listen and kill himself like I asked, so. Give him some time alone to think about it.” Dream kicks the body, rolling Tommy over. Punz looks away. He doesn’t like that Tommy’s eyes are still open. Most of his hits over the years, they despawn, or he’s gone the moment the body drops and he never has to see the outcome.

Dream just keeps talking. “Hm. Tommy asked you to shoot him in the spine. To paralyze him. Last time we tried that he said– or like, nodded a tiny bit or blinked, that it wasn’t worth losing the pain. Because it hurt or whatever. Maybe I’ll have to try that again, see what changed his mind,” Dream rummages for his journal.

“Why does it matter?” Punz watches him carefully.

“What?”

“The pain. The *how* of it all, what’s that have to do with immortality?” Punz asks, something reproachful in his tone.

“Hm,” Dream almost seems to assess him. “Do you still feel pain, Punz?”

Punz forces himself not to step back. “Yeah. On occasion.”

Dream nods, satisfied. “Then it matters.”

~

Tommy returns to the dark. Despite being out of practice, he makes it back on even ground within the hour.

It feels almost poetic that as he stares around the endless black he realizes he misses Wilbur’s Limbo. It had walls and shapes and light...

He could try to get that back, but that could easily be a months long project, if his struggles to get the jukebox were anything to go by. Not like he has anything but time. Tommy actually isn’t sure if the things he manifests will remain in Limbo when he is revived and will then be there on his return. It would fucking suck if every bit of progress he made got snatched away from him, it also sounds like exactly the type of shit luck he would get stuck with.

“I mean, not if I *deserve* to keep my progress, right?” Tommy says to nothing and no one. His voice doesn’t echo and now Tommy finds that comforting. Now that he knows an echo means reality– if this can be *called* reality, maybe *a* reality– is so bent and broken that he can see himself, reflecting out infinitely...

No echo is better.

His memories of a death are always blurry in the aftermath, it hasn’t been too long so it hasn’t really faded yet. Tommy knows Dream shot him enough to hurt, but he doesn’t remember who actually killed him.

Tommy doesn’t feel like trying to get ahold of a disc or anything else to occupy himself, so maybe if he instead just focuses, he can figure out if Punz actually did it.

“I was begging him to, I kind of remember that bit. ‘Cause Dream was being all fucked up about me not wanting to slit my fuckin’ wrists,” Tommy scowls, wandering through the darkness, the same as pacing his cell but without the need to stop and turn around. “Oh my

god— I asked him to shoot me in the fuckin’ spine! That is *not* gonna go over well when I’m back, now, is it?”

Tommy stops, staring into the dark. “You’ve gotten loud again, Tommy,” he says quietly, staring at the emptiness. “Last time... I lost that early on. Exile was— I was alone, and I got quiet from that, and then he made me get like, super quiet ‘cause he’d hurt me for saying the wrong thing. And already I’m talking again and that is going to come back and get me *bad*.”

Silence. Tommy waiting for a reply that is never coming.

“I don’t want to get all quiet again,” Tommy’s voice grows smaller, weaker as it does when he’s afraid. He refuses. “I don’t want to be quiet again,” he repeats louder, more forcefully.

And still, there is no one to reply.

“Dream hurt Wilbur to hurt me. I think... that was him punishing me for trying to escape again, right? What about for me killing him, does it cover that as well?” Tommy huffs, frustrated, resuming his walking. “And now *Punz* is here, and that’s the one thing I need, right? An unknown variable to come cloppin’ in to cause more problems.”

“I really don’t remember what killed me,” Tommy frowns. “If it was *him*, and he killed me when I asked... I really don’t know if that’s... if that should count as something good from all this.”

~

Phil is torn wildly between guilt and relief. His son is alive and back and he looks like he’s about to ask Phil to run him through with a sword again because someone else went in his place. However much Phil wants to help him, he knows all he can do is hope they get Tommy back. Wilbur remains curled on the edge of the platform of New L’Manberg. The sun starts to set and Phil realizes Wilbur won’t move without someone else to make him.

“Wil? Come on in before the mosquitos eat you alive,” Phil calls from the doorway.

Wilbur jumps and Phil almost panics, thinking he’s going to fall forward off the edge, but he catches himself, rigid, an iron grip white knuckled on the wood.

“You alright, mate?” Phil tries instead.

Wilbur seems to motion something close to a nod before he stands, turning around and returning to the warm light spilling from Phil’s doorway.

“They’re not back yet,” Wilbur croaks, his voice hoarse. Phil can see he’s been crying.

“No. I haven’t heard anything from Techno yet,” Phil winces sympathetically. “Do you want to wash up, maybe? You’re a bit...” Phil had cleared some of the blood from the back of Wilbur’s head, but that did nothing for the rest of it.

Wilbur nods shortly, looking almost frigid, like he’s an uninvited guest in the company of strangers. “Can I use your bath?”

“Downstairs,” Phil nods him in.

“You’ve got a downstairs? Thought the whole place is on stilts,” Wilbur frowns, puzzled.

“Yeah, it’s walled off from the water and then it’s underground.”

Wilbur shudders. “I think... I think I’d rather use your sink up here, then.”

“What? Why?” Phil follows him nervously as Wilbur takes off his coat, which is stiff with dried blood and salt.

Wilbur keeps that thin, solemn frown, dark eyes fixated on the floor. “I... I was under water. Where Dream had me prisoner. I think. There was salt water pooled on the floor of the cell.”

“O-Oh,” Phil falters. He doesn’t know how to reply to that. “That’s fine, Wil. I can stay up in the loft, but I’m there if you need me. You can use the kitchen, then. I’ll bring up soap and towels first,” Phil descends into his basement. The instant coolness of being underground, the dampness in the air, he can imagine Wilbur being unsettled by it.

Phil returns to Wilbur already hunched over the sink, running his hair under the faucet, a bloody and tattered shirt alongside his coat. Phil stops, for a moment he cannot move. Wilbur’s skin is awash with scrapes and bruises in varying shades of severity.

His right shoulder and bicep is faded to the yellows and greens of older bruising, his left however has deep purple marks that, on a second glance, Phil realizes is in the shape of a hand holding him there. Phil hadn’t been able to see it from the turned up collar of his jacket, but a mixture of green and brown bruising make a ring around Wilbur’s neck as well. Lighter bruises dot his back. He’s thin too. The last time Phil had seen his son alive, that day, the 16th, he’d seemed thinner as well, almost sickly from the deep bags under his eyes and his corpse certainly hadn’t looked any better, and even now alive once more his ribs stand out far too much, his spine a visible line all the way down his back, and his shoulder blades for a moment give Phil a horrifying image of cut off wings from how far they poke out.

As the blood begins to wash away there is little relief. Wilbur’s wrists have dark purple rings beaded with cuts from the chains, and it looks like he’s had a broken nose recently that was poorly set, and—

“Holy shit,” Phil can’t help but exclaim softly, almost on instinct, but it’s enough that Wilbur jumps and looks back. “Sorry, sorry, but... your ear.”

Wilbur looks at him, confused, a hand going up to his head before pulling away sharply as the wound still stings, bitter understanding dawns. “Yeah. He cut it off,” Wilbur says flatly.

“What’d you mean he—” Phil begins a worthless, outraged question before stopping himself. His anger is worthless. Nothing to be done now. “Got it,” Phil says grimly.

“Er, yeah. Part of the ear, at least. Not all of it. Finger too,” Wilbur sarcastically waves with his left hand. His index finger is gone, cleanly cut at the knuckle.

Just like Tommy’s.

“Fuck,” Phil shakes his head, setting down the towels. “Jesus Christ– Wil, you–“ he doesn’t know what to say. There’s nothing *to* say to something like that.

“Yeah,” Wilbur says roughly, pausing for a moment and gripping the edge of the sink like he feels faint. Phil can guess where his mind wanders; Tommy.

Phil doesn’t know where he stands with his son anymore. For a lot of reasons. But he’s still his dad, and he wants Wilbur to know that.

“D’you want my help? With the... well, you got a lot of injuries that need taken care of and I’m guessing you’re still a bit sore and I could... I dunno. Finish up getting the blood out of your hair,” Phil tries uncertainly. “...and so on.”

Wilbur doesn’t look at him. “I– uh. Y-Yeah,” Wilbur’s voice breaks, he brushes his eyes quickly. He clears his throat, “fuck,” he says under his breath.

“Okay,” Phil replies, trying to be kind without making Wilbur feel helpless is a difficult thing to balance. Phil grabs a chair from his dining table, pulling it over to the sink, handing him a towel. “Sit down, then.”

Wilbur obliges, the towel wrapped around his shoulders, hands balled tightly into fists, tense.

“You’re alright, mate,” Phil says gently. He soaks a towel in warm water, dampening Wilbur’s hair, brushing through it so dried blood pulled away rust red from his tangled and oily strands. They don’t talk. It’s a slow task that could’ve been much easier if Wilbur had just gone and taken a bath, but Phil couldn’t care less. He’s as careful as he can around the welts on the back of Wilbur’s head, delicately dabbing away blood, the same for his ear, murmuring apologies when Wilbur flinches, but he never complains.

Phil ends up kneeling in front of him, brushing away dried blood from under his fingernails, grief and fury carefully bottled at the mostly healed wound where Wilbur’s left index finger used to be. He hasn’t looked at Wilbur’s face yet, even as he knows there’s blood there too. Phil doesn’t know how long it takes him to work up the courage, but eventually he says, “you can talk to me. If you want. Or not. It’s okay either way. I’m not going anywhere.”

At first Wilbur doesn’t say anything, and Phil assumes he doesn’t want to talk, the silence continues on, until finally:

“I’m not supposed to– I shouldn’t be here,” Wilbur whispers shakily.

Phil pauses, still holding Wilbur’s hand, he looks up at his son’s face and Wilbur looks so young. Phil would always see Wilbur as his little boy, but even with Wilbur’s eyes shadowed and haggard, the tears that spill down his cheeks, his eyes pleading, it’s like Phil is staring at his son from a different time, when Wilbur could look at him, scared and desperate, and know his father could fix it, that his dad could dig out the splinter, could replace a guitar string, could help him find whatever had been lost. Wilbur is just as desperate and vulnerable and weak, but there’s none of that faith left. Not the kind Phil had once known. And still, Wilbur is pleading.

“Wil,” Phil cups his cheek, brushing away tears. “You have every right to be here. And so does Tommy. So you’re gonna stay here with us and we’re gonna bring him home.”

“Please, Phil,” Wilbur takes Phil’s hand. “I can’t– I can’t leave him there, I can’t.”

Phil takes a deep breath, the ache in his chest only growing worse. “I know what you want from me, Wil. I won’t make the same mistake twice. Not when I just got you back.”

Wilbur lets go, no longer looking Phil in the eye, fixated on the ground, desperation traded for something colder. “Right. Got it.”

“You’ve got to understand, Wil, I–”

“I understand,” Wilbur stands. “I’m gonna go get washed up,” he walks past him and descends downstairs and underground without a second thought. Phil knows Wilbur hasn’t suddenly abandoned his fears. He’s leaving to punish himself as much as Phil.

Phil cannot feel guilty for refusing to kill his son, but he knows if they don’t get Tommy back, Wilbur is never going to stop trying, one way or another.

~

Tommy is alive again. It’s harder for him to figure out when his consciousness realized it had a mortal body once more without those stupid fucking words, *wake up*.

But that means... Tommy squints in the dim light of the glowstone lamp. He’s on the floor of his cell, and someone else stands across from him.

“You’re back?” The figure approaches, crouching down next to him, annoyingly waving a hand in front of his face.

“Oi, fuck off, you’re gonna make me dizzy,” Tommy grumbles hoarsely. It takes a few more seconds for him to adjust to the light and refocus on the living world. “So... he let you have the revivebook, then?”

Punz steps back. “Yeah. I mean, he gave me a copy. Didn’t let me see much of the inside,” he says gloomily.

“Uh huh. Makes sense,” Tommy laughs. “Ow...” His head hurts, but Tommy almost thinks dying reset him a bit. That jittery hysteria Tommy had before, first to tear Dream apart, then terrified of what would happen to him, it’s almost dulled. Now he’s just weary.

“Are you hurt?” Punz asks, intrigued rather than concerned.

“I just got undeaded yeah I’m fuckin’ hurt,” Tommy snaps. “What’d you think happens when you shoot a man?”

Punz frowns, “I mean, you look healed.”

“Doesn’t mean it doesn’t still hurt.”

“Do you feel weak?”

Tommy gives him a scathing once over. “Let me guess. You wanna know if you could die in a fight, get revived, and keep swinging?”

Punz frowns, unsure if he should feel offended or not. “I mean, yeah.”

“Well, first off, you’d need someone there to revive your ass, dunno if they’d get the chance if they’re fighting and shit,” Tommy struggles to sit up, wincing. “And secondly, you come back weak and confused and fuckin’ sore. I mean, you get used to it, sort of. But it’s not like totems or god apples or other magic shit to help you, all it does is make you alive again. That’s about it.”

Punz nods, considering this carefully. At least he's not taking fucking *notes* like Dream.

“You’re not bothered that he didn’t actually let you learn it? Thought you were smarter than that, Punz. What is it?” Tommy gestures vaguely in the air, “teach a man to fish, give a man a fish? You happy just bein’ a fish?”

Punz grows more irritated, “that’s not how that works, I wouldn’t *be* a fish—” Punz stops himself, refusing to fall into Tommy’s nonsense. “And I expected this from Dream. It’ll take time—” Punz blinks like he’s woken up properly from something, “why am I talking about this with *you*?” He scoffs.

Tommy shrugs, “dunno, just trying to make conversation. Anyway,” Tommy glances around the room expectantly. “Where’s the food?”

“What?”

“Ugh, he didn’t even tell you *that*?” Tommy gives him the most pitying look he can manage. “I told you. Revival takes a lot out of you, man. I’m fuckin’ starving. He really didn’t?” Tommy sighs. “Post-death, I get more food. Highlight of the fuckin’ day for me.”

“You’ve been causing trouble already. Why would you expect me to reward that?”

“It’s not a *reward*,” Tommy scoffs. “It’s just... how he keeps me functional. You don’t even have to do it right this second, but I wouldn’t wait too long.” Tommy looks at Punz expectantly, but he gives no indication of caring. It was worth a shot, not to say Tommy had very high hopes for Punz, but it felt like a believable enough thing. “Fine, but when you two come back to find me passed out or fuckin’ dead again ‘cause you were careless, don’t blame me for the inconvenience, I’m sure Dream will love that.”

Tommy stares at Punz, not even waiting for a reply, but like he’s putting together some pieces. Tommy badly suppresses another laugh, like he knows something Punz doesn’t. He actually looks *smug*.

“What’re you looking at?” Punz says brusquely.

“You know, Punz,” Tommy’s voice is less jaunty and whiny now, instead only a cool certainty, yet again something between pity and contempt returns to his gaze. “Dream told

me we were figuring out immortality together too.”

Punz doesn't know what he expected from Tommy. It wasn't that. Or maybe it isn't Tommy's words that surprised him, but his own reaction to it. For the first time since choosing this path, since working with Dream, Punz feels... not worried, not even something like regret or irritation. Punz won't acknowledge it, not even to himself, but Tommy staring at him with such certainty, such *camaraderie*, it scares him.

“Sure, Tommy, you're helping us figure out immortality, alright. But that's about all, huh?” Punz says dryly. He doesn't know why he feels the need to argue back. “What, you think being a labrat and being a business partner are somehow comparable in Dream's mind?”

Rather than put off, Tommy seems almost delighted, grinning. “Now you're getting it. You know how he said I could live a bit more free range, wander around the base? Not so sure if that's still true, but it's what he said. See, he *changes his mind*, don't he? All depends on what Dream feels like. So, just because he lets you wander a little further right now doesn't mean he thinks you're a *person*.” Tommy scoffs at the notion, giving Punz one more patronizing, pitying once over. “You're just so well trained you don't even need a leash, eh?”

Punz's anger sparks more easily than he would've liked, and all he can think of are Dream's words, “*What, were you gonna go over there and actually hit him to make him listen to you? Because that's what you'd have to do.*” Tommy and Dream are both challenging him. Maybe for now Punz can avoid acting, he can use the easy, amoral excuse of *it doesn't matter who does it*, and letting Dream step in when he pauses, for so long. What, Punz can shoot this kid in the head, but he can't slap him across the face? Dream was already finding his hesitation amusing, happy to jump in to hit Tommy instead, but Punz doesn't want Dream to eventually take it for weakness, if he doesn't already.

So hit him now. Do it, he talked back. He thinks you're weak too. He called you a dog on a leash. At the very least threaten him.

“You're having a hard time dealing with being out of control again, aren't you?” Punz says instead.

Tommy narrows eyes, scowling. While Punz certainly isn't wrong, Tommy has been pushing for a *reason*. He's not expecting Punz to turn out to be some hero, but he's not like Dream. He hesitates. He doesn't look like he's having *fun*. The bar is low, but that still counts for something, of course, that depends on what Punz does next. Punz hasn't hurt him yet. Not really. Okay, shooting him in the head might count, but Tommy considers that small potatoes. He's just watched. Tommy definitely doesn't expect the man to step in and ask Dream to hold back a bit, but when Dream isn't here, Tommy wants to know what to expect. Maybe pushing isn't the right move, maybe he should keep trying to stay on Punz's good side, but Tommy would rather know than not. Better than being stupid enough to let his guard down. Pain is pain, sure, but Tommy fucking hated it when Dream would play nice for a day, just to see Tommy's surprise when he finally snapped back to violence. Tommy watches warily as Punz searches his inventory, always expecting a weapon.

“Here,” Punz passes Tommy dried steak. “There's your food. Maybe Dream will still let you wander around the base, but that's not gonna be my problem. For now you're staying here,”

Punz leaves Tommy there, locking the cell behind him.

Tommy stares at the closed doorway, not sure what to make of it. Instead of lashing out or hurting him for daring to question him— for daring to *insult* him, because really that's what Tommy had done, what he had deliberately pushed the envelope with, Punz had obliged, either fallen for or chosen to go along with Tommy's little ploy for food, and left him alone without even a threat hanging over his head. Tommy doesn't feel better. If anything, it sets him more on edge. He needs to know where Punz's limit is, all he knows is Punz isn't above belittling his weak efforts of resistance. Dickhead.

Chapter End Notes

Just wanted to mention I have another project in the works right now! It's a mafia au with all different perspectives. The first work features mostly awesamponk angst and cabinetduo, but eventually it'll have a lot more perspectives, crimeboys, karlnapity, etc etc

[If that interests you, you can read the first nine chapters here!](#)

Not much else to say to this one. take care of yourselves, everyone <3

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

CW: suicidal ideation, c!Dream being c!Dream, claustrophobia.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tubbo returns past dawn the following morning, Sapnap beside him. Wilbur hadn't tried to sleep. One look at their faces and he knows there won't be any happy reunions today.

"Techno? And the other guy— Ranboo?" Wilbur asks.

"Nothing yet," Sapnap says with something stubbornly still like optimism. *Yet*. Like they still have a chance.

"They went back to Techno's. Gonna try and get some supplies to get through the Nether easier," Tubbo says. "You look less awful."

Wilbur smiles wryly, "thanks, I clean up pretty good, huh?"

"Tubbo and I are gonna need to rest, but I wanted to talk with everyone. Get together the group, try to... to get search parties going," Sapnap says.

Phil is at the back of the room, doing his best to bury his irritation, because when they all knew Dream had his son, there were no search parties or any discussion of such and Phil had assumed no one had wanted to waste resources on such a longshot, all their dedication instead to keeping Tommy safe. But now it seems regardless of how desperate and unlikely, they'll still search. If it's Tommy, they'll do whatever it takes to save him. Phil knows there's nothing to be done about the past, that Tommy himself had been the most insistent that Wilbur could be saved, but it still leaves him restless.

Tubbo isn't looking at any of them, he leans against Phil's counter, continuing to stare at the ground.

"Okay, I don't know if Sam is set on staying with Ponk or not, but I can ask him. Tubbo, could you ask Eret? They can get like, their knights together and stuff to help. And if I ask Sam, maybe he can get the Badlands too. And someone needs to stay here in case someone comes after Wilbur," Sapnap looks to Phil.

Phil nods stiffly. "I'll keep him safe."

"Once I'm better, I want to help," Wilbur says.

Glances exchanged between Sapnap and Phil, both doubtful.

“When will that be, exactly?”

All eyes turn to Tubbo, him looking up at them through his bangs.

Tubbo continues. “Wilbur, you are ill. You realize that, surely. When we first got Tommy back, it took weeks for him to get back any of his health, and even then. I don’t think you can take on days traveling and wandering the wilderness. You just can’t,” he shrugs, utterly unfazed by his own bluntness. “Tommy, even when he got better, he couldn’t do anything like what we need to do. If you want to help us, what you need to do is tell us what you know.”

“I don’t—” Wilbur begins before faltering. “I don’t know anything, I—”

Tubbo cuts in sharply, “you must know *something*.”

A pause, Wilbur at a loss, mouth hanging open as he stares up at him.

Sapnap breaks the tension. “I’m going to get people here,” he quickly steps out.

“Tubbo, do you want to get some rest? I’m sure Ranboo won’t mind if you go next door and sleep in his place,” Phil continues to try and defuse Tubbo.

Tubbo is still staring at Wilbur far too coldly, there are deep bags under his eyes and it’s clear he’s struggling to keep focused, but he doesn’t waver. “I’d like to talk with everyone first. Like Sapnap said. And I’d like to talk with Wilbur too.”

Sapnap returns, “Sam is coming, he doesn’t know if the Badlands will join. Eret is reaching out to HBomb and Puffy. Punz is on his way too.”

“Good,” Tubbo nods curtly.

Wilbur doesn’t know why he feels like he’s on trial.

Sam shows up first, Ponk close behind. From the way Sam won’t stop tightly holding their hand, it’s easy to guess Ponk is here just so Sam knows they’re safe. They look okay, all things considered. Although, there could always be post death wounds Wilbur just can’t see.

Punz is soon to follow, scanning the room, his gaze meets Wilbur’s and he looks away quickly. Wilbur is unsurprised. Everyone is uneasy around him now.

The arrival of Eret and Puffy leaves the group too crowded for Phil’s small house and instead they disperse over the platforms of New L’Manberg.

“We have two directions to search. Through the Nether, and in the overworld where we found Wilbur,” Sapnap takes the lead, a little uncertain, but pushing on because Tubbo clearly isn’t up for making a speech.

“And, what is it we’re looking for? Last time, his base was tucked up in a mountain, it wasn’t exactly easy to find,” Eret points out.

“Wilbur, is there anything you can tell us about where you were kept?” Sapnap, somewhat regretfully, turns to the undead ex president.

Wilbur looks panicked. “It w-was– It was dark. And– And when he moved me above ground, he knocked me out, s-so–”

“Wil, last night you said you were underground and underwater, yeah?” Phil interjects gently.

“Y-Yeah, and it was– It was *salt* water, but– that’s whole *oceans*, there’s– there’s *nothing*,” Wilbur stammers.

It isn’t exactly a helpful hint to give them all hope for the future or a goal to look toward. Normally voices would tend toward clamoring, an overlapping stream of people doing their best to help, but instead there is only an uneasy silence.

“Thank you, Wilbur,” Tubbo is the only one entitled to break that silence, it would seem. “It gives us something, right?” Tubbo offers to the others.

The others look maybe a modicum calmer, but Wilbur still looks half distraught.

“O-Okay, yeah. Yeah, I can– I can help,” Wilbur stands, his hands fidgeting at his sides almost violently, balling into a fist before unclenching and scratching at nothing. “We do it like– Like we did before, yeah? Tommy– He’s fucking clever when he wants to be, so when he gets a message to Ghostbur, then he can pass it along to you all!” He looks at all of them, something wild in his eyes like this is an epiphany which means something.

Silence.

Eret speaks up, hesitant and careful. “But wouldn’t we have to *kill you*, Wilbur?”

Wilbur stares back, faltering for maybe a moment. “I mean, yeah, but– I mean... I mean...”

Wilbur cannot think of a fair enough justification for these people other than the fact that this is his plan anyway. He turns to Tubbo. If anyone here will make the hard choice, the sacrificial choice, from everything Tommy had told him about how Tubbo has changed, surely Tubbo will do this to save his best friend.

Tubbo looks thoughtful, calculating something behind his eyes. “We’d only have one shot. We’d have to guess and assume with utter certainty that Tommy has figured out his own location and found a way to pass it to Ghostbur. It’s one shot and one message and Tommy has only been gone 16 hours. It’s too soon. And I doubt Tommy has been dead all that time.”

There’s a shared dread in that, unspoken, but there is the matter of Dream not needing to kill Tommy to hurt him. And if he is not dead, what else could be happening?

Tubbo sighs, trying to steady himself. “Sapnap, could you– I’m sorry, I know you’re tired too, but if you could get them organized?” Tubbo asks.

“Yeah, of course, man,” Sapnap nods quickly.

“Come on,” Tubbo gently tugs on Wilbur’s arm, guiding him not back toward Phil’s house, but outside of L’Manberg, toward the hillside with Ghostbur’s crane.

Tubbo stops at the top of the hill, turning back around to face New L’Manberg and the many figures clustered on her docks, trying to conjure hope from nothing. Wilbur stops beside him, keeping a good meter between them. He doesn’t know why he’s here.

“I’m sorry about all of this,” Tubbo almost sounds like a politician, apologizing for the inconveniences of a campaign. No, not a politician, not even a spy, Wilbur notes. He sounds like a leader. “I know you’ve been through hell. And I know you’re ready to run back into it and... honestly, I appreciate it. Respect it, even. You’ve done so much to try to help Tommy, but right now we don’t need you dead, we need you stable. We need you doing everything you can to remember anything else about where Dream took you.” Tubbo turns away from his country to face its tragedy of a founder. “I won’t lie to you. I won’t tell you there isn’t a situation where I would consider you dying and therefore being able to help Tommy in some way, but not yet. And ideally, not ever. It is a last resort, do you hear me?” He gives Wilbur a look which leaves no room for argument.

“Yeah, y-yes, Tubbo. I hear you,” Wilbur stammers, nodding sharply.

Tubbo smiles and maybe somewhere in there is a flicker of the young boy Wilbur had once led into battle. Too young. Not anymore. “I’m not giving up on you, Wilbur Soot. That’s something Tommy would never forgive me for, yeah?”

“Yeah, guess not,” Wilbur manages a weak smile in response. He knows his eyes are watering. He genuinely feels grateful, maybe even forgiven or cared for in some way, but the real comfort it offers is that Tubbo is not wholly above helping Wilbur with his backup plan. That’s something for him to hold onto. And maybe that was the intended effect. Wilbur will wait for Tubbo to agree it’s time instead of rushing into death carelessly. It’s easier to postpone a suicide than to cancel one completely.

~

Punz listens to Sapnap attentively, but he’s almost disappointed. These people know *nothing*. Searching the Nether is definitely useless, the nearest portal to the base is still a trip, and it’s unmarked, on the Nether roof where it will only be found by chance, and if someone were to get curious and go through it, the patch of land would be as unmarked as everything else. Their plans to try to back track from where they found Wilbur are almost sad. It’s not even that Dream took Wilbur a brief distance away, just to be safe, Dream had dragged his unconscious body across the Nether roof and then sailed an ocean away from that equally distant portal. If Sapnap’s greatest hope is combing over a patch of unexplored wilderness, well. Punz isn’t even sure why he’s still here to keep an eye on them.

The poor bastards have no idea the best path to Tommy is standing beside them.

“Punz?” Eret speaks up.

Punz snaps out of his thoughts, confused, abrasive. “What?”

“You still with us?” Puffy asks. Too many eyes on him now, but they’re all concerned, not suspicious.

“Y-Yeah, I’m just... it’s kind of weird to think about, huh? Dream has figured out immortality, and he’s keeping it to himself, or not just himself– he decides to share it with *Tommy* for some reason,” Punz scoffs. “Just, feels a little ridiculous, y’know?”

Sam looks disapproving. “What do you mean immortality?”

Punz immediately senses he’s done something wrong. “I mean, that’s what Dream is hoarding, right? The revive book? That’s why he took Tommy, right? To test it out or something?”

Even now, they don’t look suspicious, maybe even something pitying, like they all know something he doesn’t.

“What?” Punz presses.

“You didn’t see him, man. When we first got him back– Tommy was...” Sapnap winces.

“Yeah, whatever Tommy was, it... it wasn’t immortal,” Ponk remembers it well. Checking over that kid, however healed he had been at that point, it was like going through a checklist for malnourishment and scar tissue.

“Well, yeah. Obviously what we’re after is Tommy, but for Dream, Tommy was just a side effect. His whole deal is hoarding immortality,” Punz almost phrases it like a question.

“What makes you say that?”

Punz’s hand impulsively goes for his sword as Tubbo’s cool tone speaks up behind him. “Tubbo,” Punz doesn’t know what else to say besides an unsure greeting, he notes that Wilbur is not with him.

Tubbo isn’t looking at him, he’s staring at the ground, twisting something between his fingers, it looks like a scrap of ribbon. “Dream’s excuses are irrelevant to us. I understand what you are saying Punz, and I wish that simple, logical conclusion were accurate, but seeing as Dream could have fucked off with his revival book, tested it on someone who *wasn’t* so well guarded–” and *well loved*. Tubbo does not voice that aloud. “–I reckon that isn’t really his priority.”

Puffy speaks up, hesitant even as she knows what comes next. “So, his priority is–”

“Tommy. Obviously,” Tubbo says shortly. “We’re not looking to appease him. Not like last time with–” finally he wavers, a shaky breath. “With exile. He won’t let Tommy go. And *once* we save him, he won’t stop trying to take him back.” Tubbo stops his fidgeting, looking up at Punz with an expression far too calm considering the deep bags under his eyes, he pauses like he’s waiting for something, and in his hands, Punz can see the lodestone. “So, we’re going to destroy that man, yes?”

Punz was sent here to evaluate what these people know, if they pose any threat, and Punz has found nothing that would threaten their mission or experiments, but there is still something. These people do not evaluate Dream based on his experiments or lofty goals, only on what he is keeping from them, only from the damage he can cause. Tubbo out of everyone, pushing on on his last life has cause to seek out immortality, and he seems far more dead set on eliminating it and the power it holds, if considering it at all. Thus far Dream has only been referred to in the terms of the obsessive, never in that of negotiation, because according to them, the only thing Dream wants is the person they're trying to save. Tubbo is still staring at him, not quite expectant, but just seeing if he will reply, so Punz nods.

~

Tommy is bored. Not the easy, lazy sort of boredom, rather, the sort where it's only irritating because there is nothing to distract him from the fact that he is waiting for something terrible to happen.

He paces again.

The other thing he did in his old cell besides pace had been memorizing the cracks in the obsidian, tracing shapes in it. Other times messing with the chipped side of the sink, flaking off rust or something. Tommy hasn't figured out the patterns here yet, like finding something to obsess over is the same as choosing a new book to read and he doesn't feel up to looking.

So he paces.

The challenge almost makes it interesting, having to retrain himself from near endless hours of ten steps forward, turn, ten steps back to now *eight* steps forward, turn, eight steps back. The dampness of the floor is irritating and Tommy wonders fleetingly if Dream has considered the dangers of trench foot. He supposes, Dream will probably kill him before it has time to develop, but it is still an unsettling change to the sound his steps make on the ground. He doesn't like it. Everything is colder here because of it. They're far underground, *and* there's moisture in the air. It makes him all shivery. It's easier to start to cough.

Really, Tommy was surprised that Dream didn't let him drown himself, but maybe he shouldn't have been, he could tell Tommy was asking because he thought that would be easier. Dream rarely lets him take the easy way out. Although, drowning being *easy* is an inane thought. Especially in saltwater. It *burns*. His lungs in agony. It isn't quick either. Tommy chose drowning not for its painlessness, but simply because he is good at it by now. He's learned to bury his deepest impulses, to inhale water faster, to ignore how sharp the pain gets in his chest, to convince himself that water is what he needs, not air.

Honestly, the knife could've been less painful. If he had only been able to have the kind of practice he's had with drowning with a knife, maybe he could've stabbed himself somewhere that would've bled out quick.

Tommy turns around sharply, halfway to the back of the cell when the stone bricks slide away. It's no longer a wall of lava, probably would evaporate the water, instead redstone mechanics move away two blocks from the wall. Tommy hates that he can't hear him

coming until the door is already opening. Tommy presses himself against the back wall, watching carefully as Dream enters.

“Hi, Tommy,” Dream sounds almost bored. That’s bad. Dream can’t be bored already. “Sorry you were stuck in here all day. Punz is still a little *nervous* about you wandering around,” Dream says with condescending pity for his partner in crime.

Tommy doesn’t say anything, just stays as far away as he can manage.

“What do you know about the lodestone?” Dream asks.

“The..?” Tommy is wary. “What do you mean?”

“The lodestone, Tommy,” now Dream is irritable. “The tiny lodestone you had constructed to *fuck with me.*” *There’s* that anger. It’s strange that Tommy actually finds it comforting, a reminder that he isn’t being paranoid, that that dangerous rage still lurks just underneath whatever facade Dream has chosen for himself. “How was it made?”

Tommy swallows thickly, mouth very dry all of the sudden. “J-Just like any old lodestone, I t-think. I *think*. It was just... just making it tiny and detailed enough that was the problem.” Tommy manages to hold back his impulse for maybe a few seconds before he toes a dangerous line. “Why?”

A weighted pause. Dream isn’t close enough to hit him, but he’s too quiet. Tommy feels sick.

“Did I say you could ask questions?” Dream says coolly.

“Sorry– I’m sorry,” Tommy’s response is automatic. He’s pressed into the stonebrick wall, the cold water accumulated on it adds to his hair already standing on end. Fleeting, foolishly, Tommy wishes Wilbur were there. He doesn’t know why. Since the fucking revolution days, Tommy always stood ready to fight in front of Wilbur. Maybe he just would’ve felt better, standing in front of someone else instead of cowering alone.

Dream pauses another moment. He *knows* when he’s quiet it makes Tommy nervous. That’s *why* he waits. “Hm. You’re sure there’s not more to it?”

“I don’t– I don’t know. I swear, I j-just don’t know, I just saw them do it, I swear,” Tommy doesn’t know why he already sounds like he’s pleading.

“Who?”

“W-What?”

“Who is *they*?” Dream’s mere irritation feels like a rattlesnake’s tail.

“Um, it w-was– It was Philza, and Badboyhalo, and R-Ranboo, and this guy Foolish,” Tommy says it before he considers the consequences. “Y-You’re not gonna go after them, are you? You c-could just– you could just steal the lodestone! Right? Make your own that way? That’s what you want, isn’t it?” Tommy laughs, voice high and panicked.

Dream chuckles. “I actually forgot you were *such* an idiot.”

“I’m—” Tommy was actually about to *protest*. He manages to stop himself at the last second, a hand flying to cover his mouth as he waits for Dream to punish him for even trying.

“No, go ahead, say it, Tommy,” Dream takes one step closer. “You think I’m *wrong*?”

Tommy quickly shakes his head, not trusting himself to speak.

“Or— Or, wait, do you think *I’m* an idiot?” Dream is almost melodramatic in his offendedness, a hand going to his chest, as if hurt. “Do you really think I’d be fucking stupid enough to bring the lodestone *you* tried to sneak in here *back*? Is that really how little you think of me? Go on, answer,” Dream orders him as Tommy continues to try to press himself into the back wall.

“N-No I’m the idiot— *I’m* the idiot, I know— I know I didn’t— I didn’t think about it, I’m sorry,” Tommy rambles with that same desperation before quickly shutting up.

Dream pauses again, just to see him panic. Another laugh. “Alright, Tommy. You can stop looking like you’re gonna cry. I’ve got my own research to do. You can do what you want.” And then Dream is gone, leaving the door open behind him.

Tommy stays put for a moment, still holding his breath, before he slides down the back wall and tries to calm himself. Fucking hell— had Tommy always felt that tense, that much adrenaline with every fucking conversation? Had Tommy really lived so perpetually exhausted before his rescue? Maybe he’d develop back up a tolerance for it.

Tommy stares at the open doorway. It still feels strange to him, that Dream had said he could wander the base and he’d meant it.

He knows where he wants to go.

Tommy gets to his feet carefully, stepping up to the tiny corridor. It was a 1x2 tunnel and dimly lit and fucking *suffocating*. This whole place felt fucking suffocating. At least the last place had had that massive bloody hall, towering above him. That had been its own sort of unnerving, but Tommy has never done well in small spaces. Tommy moves quickly down the corridor, hoping he can remember the way. Okay, the main tunnel. To his right, the dim light of the dome, to his left, a dark passageway extending, the sea lanterns half visible past a slab the only indication of depth as the tunnel extends further back. He would’ve thought his time in Limbo would’ve left him all but immune to the dark. His cell still was lit by glowstone and was definitely the brightest thing in this place, so the dark is still disarming. He follows down the corridor, to the sides he sees the occasional iron door and in a new opening he glimpses a library. Tommy assumes that’s where Dream is and is quick to walk past it, making his way to the furthest back doorway he’s found so far. Double iron doors he can open with a button, and past it, the scent of leaves and soil and the distant babble of chickens.

Yet again Tommy pauses just beyond the threshold, because this place, even with its harsh stone walls and low ceilings, it’s too *nice*. There’s neat rows of crops lit and warmed by

glowstone and there's a fenced off pen with two chickens from what Tommy can see. Tommy walks forward between the rows, pausing and kneeling down to investigate— there are *carrots* planted. So far Tommy has seen carrots and potatoes. Again, far too nice. There's only a small stretch of wheat, likely just for seeds to feed the chickens.

Tommy has been walking slowly, because he knows once he reaches that stupid pen he's doomed. Still, eventually Tommy crouches down from outside the fence, and one of the poor bastards stares at him with those stupid black eyes.

“Don't even like chickens much...” Tommy mutters. He reaches out gloomily through the fencing, the chicken coming closer, likely hoping for food, its beak nibbling harmlessly at Tommy's fingers. “Curious guy, aren't you?” Tommy sits. He does not allow himself to go through the fence. “What's a good name for a curious little guy like you—” Tommy pulls his hand back quickly, mood immediately soured. *You cannot fucking name them. You know you can't.*

Tommy does not want to deny himself the few small mercies he can find in this place, but he knows this honey is poisoned. Dream put them here so one day Tommy will fuck up bad enough he gets to butcher them in front of him. Tommy shouldn't give him the satisfaction.

No matter how hard you try to stay unattached, it'll still fucking hurt when he kills them, so just. Maybe you let yourself lose on this one, eh?

Tommy opens the fence and slips inside before one of them can make a run for it. Here instead of stone the floor is padded with *moss*. Tommy supposes hay would rot quickly, but it's strange. It's like sitting on a fuzzy, damp carpet. The other chicken stops by as well. Tommy reaches out, letting it nibble at his hand as well.

“I wanna pet you, but I don't think we know each other that well yet, do we?” Tommy murmurs. He speaks softly here, like somehow this is forbidden, even as he's doing exactly as Dream designed. He's being weak. “Aw, fuck it— You seem like a... like a Linda. And you seem like a Norbert,” he nods to the other one. “You two married, then?” He asks conversationally. “Nah, that's boring, not the marriage bit, maybe you're... not Norbert, Berta. And you're married. Chickens can be gay,” Tommy nods wisely. “Linda and Berta. Couple of lesbian chickens. That's pretty poggers.”

Linda and Berta seem utterly indifferent to his support of their relationship, but that's fine by him.

“You ladies want something to eat?” Tommy stands, reaching over to peak into a barrel just outside the fence, grabbing a handful of seed from it. “Will you eat out of my hand?” He offers hopefully. “Or are we not there yet?” One steps closer carefully. “Ah, brave Linda! I appreciate your open mindedness.” She pecks at his hand sharply. “Ow! Ow, careful,” Tommy quickly drops the seeds, Linda and Berta glad to dig them out of the moss. “Oh, I see, the missus was nervous nibbling from my hand so you had to get me to drop it. Right, fair enough. Gotta support the wife, am I right?” Tommy laughs, smile almost pained, “oh, I'm absolutely fucked, aren't I?” He mutters through gritted teeth. “I just *have* to be like this, don't I? I see a little creature and I'm just— *oh look at the wittle chicken look at its wittle beak and its feathers and oh it's so cute look at how cute it is when it's biting me!*” Tommy

scoffs. “Don’t you two worry, I would already die for you gals,” Tommy laughs more harshly now. “And sadly, in our current predicament, I probably will!”

Maybe Tommy should take some pride in this part of himself persevering. He can’t help but find things to love, can he? He just wishes that love would stop being a fucking noose around his neck.

Chapter End Notes

tddd is wonderfully, happily over. this nightmare is not!

this chapter is more filler than anything, but I felt bad keeping you guys waiting, I was only letting myself work on the tddd finale, but now this fic is back on my radar! Hope this will hold you over for a bit <3

Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

CW: burns, discussions/threats of violence (?), dehumanization probably, c!Dream being nuts. you know.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

You whisper to Dream: stasis

Punz's injured leg still twinges slightly as he hits the trap door.

"How are things on the home front?" Dream asks dryly.

"Oh, they're hopeless. They're just picking a direction to run in because it's better than giving up," Punz scoffs. "How about here?"

"I wanna show you– I'm trying to figure out that trick with the lodestone," Dream returns to the narrow corridor, Punz close behind. Punz pauses as he sees light streaming from an open doorway down the side corridor. Punz tries to bottle his irritation. "Where's Tommy?"

"What? Oh, I dunno. Probably found some corner to cry in– come see what I have so far," Dream proceeds past an iron door to his library. Bits of Netherite are laid out on the enchanting table, alongside a few test runs of carved stone. An enchanted Netherite pickaxe is very difficult to wield delicately, but Dream has clearly done his best.

"Why are you working on this stuff, then? Shouldn't we continue with the experiments?" Punz asks.

"Are you kidding? Tommy's not going anywhere, and if we figure out this, if he *does* go anywhere we'll know where!" Dream continues on excitedly. "I can't believe those idiots figured this out and *I'm* having a hard time with it."

Punz gives him a look. "Thinking awfully highly of yourself, are we?"

Dream looks up at him, seemingly puzzled. "I've beaten *death*. I think it's fair for me to expect myself to figure out some old man's science project."

"Fine, but we *haven't* fully beaten death, right?" Punz continues on impatiently.

Dream sighs, fishing into his inventory before shoving a copy of the revive book into his hands. "Here. Do what you want with him. Just no permanent damage, remember, limbs don't grow back."

Maybe Punz should be more unsettled by Dream's words, but he's almost relieved. Clearly Dream isn't totally obsessed with Tommy, he's obsessed with having something to work on. Whether his fascination is in the psyche of a half crazed teenager or an unusual mechanism doesn't matter. Punz doesn't move just yet. He doesn't want to admit that without instruction he doesn't really know what to do, what there is to *test* that Dream always goes on and on about. Dream has resumed his work on carving into a tiny piece of stone, using more fine tuned iron tools. Making detail on *Netherite* without the use of enchantment in some form, whether a book or the enchanting table, is all but impossible. Dream still seems to be doing his best.

"Except the thing is, I don't know what you've already done, so," Punz tries to sound inconvenienced rather than lost.

"Why does that matter?" Dream is only half paying attention to him now. "Damnit!" He slams the tool onto the table, the piece of stone he had been carving into no bigger than a standard cut emerald and thin as the blade of a sword.

"It's too thin," Punz points out dully.

"I *know* it's too thin— the fucking point is to make it smaller!" Dream snaps. He pauses. "Sorry," he says sharply, a dismissal of Punz getting annoyed with him, not a genuine sentiment. "I'll figure it out— what were you saying?"

"I don't know what you've already tested. I don't see a point in repeating stuff, right? I'm here for one reason only, Dream. *You* said this book could get us immortality. So, I don't see a point in waiting around," Punz grows more irritated. Dream doesn't respond, so he continues, pushing for any answers. "You said before— You said something about when he feels pain—"

"Look," Dream turns around to face him. "This stuff— there's no precedent for it, alright? We are in uncharted territory. And while that makes our work *important*, it's not like there's an instruction manual."

"Which is why I'm asking you."

Dream drums his fingers on the enchanting table, thinking. Punz gives him time for his silence, sensing Dream is finally giving genuine thought to his question. Dream is. "Have you ever beaten someone to death?"

Punz stares at him. He makes no move to respond, almost like he's waiting for Dream to get to a punchline.

Dream continues like this is some indication that Punz is waiting for more answers. "Just kept on hitting them and hitting them and *hitting them*," Dream's hand right curls into a fist, "until they stopped moving?" Another pause. Punz still doesn't move. "What about strangled?" Dream steps closer. Punz refuses to step back. "You ever felt the life literally drain out of someone," Dream is very close to him now, hands held up almost in demonstration just a bit too close to Punz's own neck. "Your hands around their throat until they just sort of *break*?" Dream says that last word with a sort of eerie reverence. He

lowers his hands and Punz still doesn't move. Dream tilts his head, still somehow expecting a reply. "No? You can find out, Punz. I won't mind." Another pause. It's all too slow, Dream's words careful and precise and with far too much room for Punz to engage even if Punz hasn't even blinked, staring, fixated on that white mask like it's suddenly dawned on him that that is not a person's face. He cannot remember when he last saw Dream's face, what it might look like underneath that shield of his. Whatever Punz does, however he reacts, Dream continues anyway. "Or you can wait until we have Wilbur back. He's *fresher*." Punz has some vague inkling that this is something he should be reacting to in some way, a shiver, a shudder, something to say, and still there is nothing. And still Dream keeps going. "He doesn't know what it feels like to die all those ways yet." Behind that mask it's still too clear that Dream is sizing him up in some way. "It'll make it more real for the both of you, I think." Dream waits again, five seconds, ten seconds, twenty. Dream turns back to the enchanting table. "Like I said. Do what you want. Just no permanent damage."

Punz doesn't let go of the book Dream had pressed into his hands. He gives a sharp nod, the only acknowledgement he can manage, and leaves. He walks a little ways down the corridor, and then he pauses, leaning against the wall.

What the fuck what the fuck what the fuck—?

Punz is beginning to think he might've dived into this particular business venture without knowing what sort of depths were waiting for him. Dream has always been powerful, a little intimidating, incredibly driven. Punz has no idea what else he is.

You're going to be immortal, Punz. You get what you came for, you and Dream go your separate ways. You put all of this behind you for literally an eternity.

For a moment, a thought emerges which Punz is quick to push aside.

And when you leave, when all this is over, what happens to Tommy?

Tommy hears the iron door open from the other end of the room and bolts to his feet, scrambling over the fence in an effort to get away from the chickens as quickly as possible. *He* can be the only target. He relaxes maybe a hair when instead of Dream it's Punz who stands cautiously in the doorway, watching him with a frown. Tommy glances down to his hands. Punz has a copy of the revive book. Tommy takes one step back.

"What?" Tommy asks, accusing and wary.

"What're you doing in here?" Is what Punz asks first, glancing around at the rows of crops in muted disinterest.

"Uh. Getting... getting a snack," Tommy turns to the nearest plant and digs up a filthy, raw potato.

"Right," Punz is already irritated. "Come with me."

Tommy wants to protest or complain or *something*. But really, they're still too close to the chickens for comfort, so Tommy follows him out without a word, dropping the potato by the

door.

“Where are we going?” Tommy manages that question, even daring to sound whining.

“Does it matter? We’re in a bunker.”

“Yeah, some rooms are scarier than others, dickhead...” Tommy mutters gloomily.

Punz returns to the dome. Tommy scans the floor. His blood is no longer in the water. Interesting. It means there must be some circulation somewhere. Maybe Dream planned on this room being where they killed him, like how the room at the old base had a drain. Whatever is causing the waterflow, it’s very slow, other than their splashing footsteps the water seems undisturbed, except of course for the two bubbling stasis chambers near the trap door leading out into the water.

Punz leans against the wall, sitting on top of one of the chests, observing the revive book carefully. He knows it combusts upon opening, which is irritating.

“So, what’d you want with me, then?” Tommy is impatient in a way he could never get away with with Dream, scuffing his feet, splashing the water as he stands in the middle of the room.

Punz looks up at him, mulling something over. These questions might be better saved for Dream, but Dream is *busy* at present, apparently.

“The revivebook. It burns automatically. Do you think there might be a way for it to actually *work* automatically without conscious thought?” Punz asks.

“What’d you mean?” Tommy squints at him. He’s not interested in philosophy or logistics. He just wants to know what Punz is going to do to him.

“So, it requires conscious thought, right? You open the book, you focus on the intended target, it burns, and then you’re revived,” Punz begins.

“Why the fuck do you think I’d know that? I’m always *dead* for that bit, remember?” Tommy scowls.

“Okay, well. Now you know,” Punz continues irritably. “If there was a way to... I dunno, maybe alter the enchantment?”

“Okay, but you’d still need a trigger, *obviously*,” Tommy scoffs. “You want it to bring *you* back to life without needing any help, but you can’t trigger shit when you’re dead, bitch!”

Punz doesn’t know if he’s more irritated by Tommy’s audacity or the fact that he is most definitely right. “What makes you think you can talk to me like that?” Punz says coldly.

Tommy doesn’t answer, even though he could. He resents Punz, he finds him unpredictable. He doesn’t seem as nuts as Dream, but he goes along with it nonetheless. And Tommy *has* to push, to see where the line is. Last time he’d pushed, Punz had responded too kindly. He hadn’t hit him, he’d given him food and left. That’s *dangerous*. Tommy cannot let himself

get too comfortable, and somehow pushing with the kind of rough insults that used to come so easily to him is more manageable than considering a time where bending the rules *matters*. Tommy doesn't really know why he's pushing. He should be trying to make an ally here. *No. No, you're not trying to make a fucking friend here, because last time you thought Dream was your friend. You cannot try and make a truce with Punz because this motherfucker is still killing you and he still took you away from home and he's still with Dream. He doesn't need to start kicking you around too for you to know he is wrong. You cannot be weak around him.*

Punz sighs, giving up on getting a reply, and he doesn't scold Tommy further or threaten him or anything. Again, that's dangerous. Punz doesn't look at him anymore, instead his gaze wanders the room, as he passes the closed revive book between his hands, thinking.

"What'd you think Dream's plans are? Once the experiments are done. When this bit is over. What do you think he'll do after?" Punz asks, unsure if Tommy senses the unspoken question, *what do you think will happen to you?*

Tommy gives him a funny look, confused, almost as if trying to gauge if Punz is joking or not. "What'd you mean *over*?"

"When he's done with the experimenting part," Punz repeats.

Now Tommy is really confused, looking wary. "...why would it ever be over?"

Punz blinks, hoping he doesn't look startled. "Well, I mean, the goal is to figure out how to be immortal, properly immortal, and then why would it need to continue?"

Tommy looks almost delightedly intrigued, like Punz has just said something fascinatingly controversial. "Is *that* what the goal is?" He raises an eyebrow.

Punz knows they're inching closer to the matter he'd been dreading and looking for. "That's why I'm here." A weighted pause. "Why do *you* think Dream is doing this, then?"

Tommy snorts, poorly burying a laugh. He gives Punz another look of condescending pity. "Ohhh, Punz, my friend, I do *not* think you're prepared for me to answer that question."

Punz's anger sparks once more at Tommy treating him so differently to Dream. *Is that what you want? Do you really want Tommy to view you as the same as Dream?* "I don't know why you're acting like you have a choice," he snaps. "I'm asking, and you're going to answer me."

Tommy considers this for a moment. He's getting tired of standing, his feet are so cold in the water they're almost numb, *everything* about him is cold. He walks up to the chest beside the one Punz is sitting on, and joins him, pulling his feet out of the water and crossing his legs, his hands covering them in an attempt to get any feeling back in his pruned, icy flesh. Punz made his best attempt at ordering Tommy around, and Tommy has walked in range of his fists without a second thought, sitting beside him utterly at ease. Tommy leans back against the stonebrick, looking over at Punz with all the patience of a school teacher.

“*You* think, Dream dragged me all the way out here, that he fought tooth and nail to fucking keep me or get me back or whatever— all that shit, because he wants to be immortal?” Tommy already knows the answer, but he can’t help but ask.

“What *else* would it be?” Punz hisses.

Tommy glances back to the dark doorway into the corridor, before leaning in closer. “He thinks he’s a god, Punz,” Tommy whispers. He pulls back, looking at Punz expectantly, when Punz simply stares at him, expecting more, Tommy just shrugs, blasé as can be.

“What do you mean?” Punz forces himself to put together a question.

“What’d you mean, what’d I mean?” Tommy scoffs. “I mean what I said and I said what I mean. He’s—” Tommy gestures with some vague, meaningless flourish in the direction of the tunnels where Dream is hiding out somewhere. “Y’know?” Tommy blusters, nodding.

Punz knows the man has a bit of an ego, but he hopes— he *thinks*, Tommy is being a bit drastic. Then again...

Dream’s delighted little monologue, discussing not only the manner of killing someone, but the *feeling* of it. The textbook delusions of grandeur one might find inspired by a god smiting mortals for fun.

Punz decides to bury the thought for now.

“And what does that mean for you? What does that mean for— for this not being *over* for you, then?” Punz refocuses.

“I don’t really know what you want from me, bub,” Tommy says gruffly, gesturing to himself for emphasis. “If you’re really not getting the picture so far, I’d say you’re hopeless.”

Punz loses control for just a moment, grabbing the collar of Tommy’s shirt, dragging him closer, Tommy shuts his eyes tightly the moment Punz’s hand approaches him. “Quit screwing around and answer my question. I’m being *nice* right now, Tommy. I don’t know why you’re so dead set on me not being nice anymore.”

Tommy nods, opening his eyes just a hair, still bracing for a blow, when none comes, he relaxes, not caring that Punz is still holding him by his shirt, better his shirt than grabbing him by his throat or pulling him by his hair. Punz doesn’t even have a scale for what Tommy considers to be frightening.

“Fine,” Tommy says mildly. “Fine fine fine— you want to know what Dream’s whole deal is? Why he’s got *me* around, instead of nabbing an easier lab rat? Hell, why he let Wilbur go? Alright. Alright.” Tommy pauses once more, lips a thin line, eyebrows furrowed as he grimly thinks it over. He hasn’t just been messing with Punz, and definitely not trying to spare his feelings or opinion on Dream or whatever bullshit, the truth of it is Tommy is ashamed. He knows Punz must have some idea, but *naming* the state Tommy exists in is another beast entirely. Tommy doesn’t look Punz in the eye, staring instead at his own distorted reflection in the water. It’s only an outline with the way the shadows are cast from

the sea lanterns embeded in the floor at regular intervals. He has no face, no expression, only a shadow, pulled forward helplessly by the vague implication of an arm. He is nothing. "My life is Dream's," Tommy sounds strained, every word certain and so heavy. "He—" Tommy sighs, still not looking at Punz, but he sees his own reflected hand reach up to brush against Punz's hold on his shirt. "Can you let go, please?" He asks quietly, voice shaking for just a moment. Punz obliges, but he doesn't say a word, so Tommy continues. "He thinks he owns me. And I... I think he hates me for... for a lot of things, one of them being that I don't think that's true. Or I... I *try* to think that's not true. So he tries to prove it. He hurts me, does whatever he wants with me," Tommy shrugs, tone turning into something lighter, more mild, something horribly like acceptance, "because he can. Why wouldn't he, then? If he's entitled to me, why would he stop hurting me for... for trying to steal that back from him?" Tommy finally breaks his stare from his own reflection and looks Punz in the eye. They both look so weary, but Tommy's expression is equally marred by bitter understanding, and Punz's by something dangerously close to concern. Punz starts to say something, but he doesn't get a word out.

"I did it!" Dream's voice echoes into the dome like a firework has gone off. They both jump. Dream stops at the sight of them sitting across from one another, apparently engrossed in conversation. "Am I interrupting something?" Dream sounds amused. "If you were going to kill him, go ahead. I don't need him alive right now."

Punz turns away from Tommy sharply. "No— No, not right now. What is it?"

Dream approaches excitedly, holding in his left hand a glowing compass and in his right, a lodestone about the size of an acorn.

"You did? Like, actually?" Punz is shocked.

Dream stops, fist curling around the lodestone, reproachful. "I mean, obviously I did it. Did you really think I wouldn't?" Dream turns to Tommy. "Look. You should be excited too, Tommy. I mean, this means you might even get to be even more free range one day."

Tommy forces himself to nod. "Y-Yeah, that's— That's cool. I think it's even smaller than the one the others made."

Punz looks back at him, almost irritated that Tommy is so quick to turn back to desperately going along with whatever Dream says. Punz is getting a better grasp of how Dream earned that respect— it's not respect, it's *fear*— but he can't help but envy it just a bit.

Dream isn't oblivious to Tommy's praise only being a panicked instinct, but he doesn't seem to care. "Come with me," he nods back toward the doorway, pausing for a moment. "Unless— well, are you done with him?" He asks Punz as an afterthought.

Punz is unsettled by the implication, that Tommy is just some tool Dream has loaned him. Still, he shakes his head. "Yeah, I don't care. I... I didn't know what I was doing anyway."

"Hm," Dream nods, uninterested. "Come on, Tommy."

Tommy follows him down toward Dream's library, but library feels like the wrong word now. There's still a row of bookshelves around the enchanting table, but there's also an anvil, a stonecutter, crafting table, blast furnace, and a grindstone.

"Come here," Dream nods him over to the crafting table. "Hand."

One word and Tommy knows to hold his hand out. Usually he goes with his left. He's already down a finger, might as well let it take the rest of the damage, but Dream simply pinches a piece of leather around it, marking the length with charcoal.

Tommy wants to ask what he's doing. He doesn't, just stands there quietly.

What happened to your resistance, Tommy? I thought you didn't want to get quiet again? He thinks gloomily. It's just easier. That's the bitter truth of it. He can push Punz's buttons because thus far the consequences have been mild, but he knows how quickly and how viciously Dream can respond to any misbehavior. He fell too easily. Dream has hardly even *hurt* him yet.

"What are you doing?" Tommy asks, even with some sharpness behind his words.

"You'll see," is all Dream says.

Tommy stands there gloomily, watching with some curiosity as he sees Dream is making a mould. He watches as Dream lines up the leather and makes a band about an inch thick, nestling the lodestone on the top, before making one more loop at the bottom.

Then he begins to heat the iron, and Tommy understands.

He's too tired for even anger. He'd known from the moment he set up the stasis chamber he would be a dog on a leash. What is this but an extension of that? Tommy sits on the floor, here it is only a bit damp because of the books, as Dream continues.

Punz has followed them, it seems, and either hasn't had the same realization as Tommy or is asking more in the hopes of understanding why: "What're you doing?"

"Making a way to keep the lodestone on him," Dream says mildly. Punz frowns. "What?" Dream scoffs. "This is the *humane* option." He sees Tommy's expression change from grumpy to stricken. "I'll explain in a bit, Tommy, but as long as you keep this, you don't need to worry about it." How fucking generous of him to clue Tommy in at all, even if it's clearly only to hold it over his head as a threat.

Punz leans against the wall beside Tommy, and yet again Tommy finds it unnervingly like having company in his hellhole. *He is not a fellow captive. He's a different brand of monster. Keep your head on straight, King.*

It doesn't take very long to get enough iron melted to pour into such a small mould. Dream douses the metal in water soon enough after, steam rising with a sharp hiss. The lodestone is now encased in iron, the liquid metal running messy rivulets down the surface of the cube, so

it almost now looks like the thing is encased in a web. The lower half of the band is open, obviously, for Tommy to actually get it around his wrist.

“Perfect, right?” Dream says smugly. “Come here,” Dream nods him over. “Hand.”

Tommy again offers his left hand. The metal is still warm as Dream pushes the band around his wrist, Tommy wincing as it pinches, but once settled, it’s a perfect fit.

“Great. You gave the kid a fancy bracelet,” Punz says dryly. “If he were to run away, you’d think he’d take *off* the tracker, right?”

“Oh, I’m not done yet, obviously,” Dream scoffs. Dream again grabs Tommy’s wrist, turning it over to expose veins far too visible under pale, breakable skin. “Hm,” Dream considers it for a moment. “Yeah, this is really gonna hurt,” analytical, not sympathetic. “Punz, can you hold him down?”

“What?” Punz asks sharply just as Tommy frantically looks up at Dream, “what?!”

“Quickly, if you don’t mind. Tommy is very well trained now, but I think this one might just make him break a little,” Dream continues on, talking to Punz like Tommy can’t even understand him.

Punz does as Dream asks. Better to get whatever this is over with quickly. He comes up behind Tommy, one arm wrapping around him, keeping his right arm pinned to his side, Punz’s other hand holds Tommy’s left forearm, keeping it pinned to the table. Tommy tries struggling.

“W-What’re you– What the fuck–” Tommy tries to pull free, wriggling and kicking back against Punz’s shins to try and make him let go.

“If you don’t move as much, I’m less likely to touch your skin, Tommy,” Dream returns to the molten metal still waiting. He removes the remaining ring of metal, still glowing a violent orange, with tongs.

“No– No, let me go,” Tommy stares with wide, petrified eyes as he sees it get closer to his wrist. “*Let me go! Just– Just tie it on! Chain it on! Please, don’t!*” Dream carefully places the ring of metal so it joins the other two sides, just from proximity Tommy’s wrist already starts to burn. “*STOP! STOP STOP STOP–*” Tommy cuts himself off with a strangled scream as the metal finally brushes directly against his skin, flesh sizzling away immediately. Dream grabs a bucket of water almost lazily, finally pouring it onto the metal. It cools rapidly, the steam alone covers Tommy’s hand in a less severe burn, the metal is still hot enough to deepen the already viciously burnt tissue on the sensitive, delicate skin inside of his wrist.

Punz lets go, Tommy hits the ground with a choked cry, curling in on himself, clutching his burnt wrist, trying to push the still hot metal away, but it is a perfect fit. There is absolutely no give, other than maybe the hole in his wrist left by the burn. Tommy’s breathing comes out in frantic, whimpering gasps. Dream kicks the bucket of water his way, Tommy,

struggling to sit up, hands trembling violently, whole body trembling, dips the wound back into the water. Finally, it cools enough to at least not deepen the burn.

Punz refuses to look down at Tommy, even as he can still hear him struggling to breathe around his sobs. Punz looks at Dream instead. “Health pot?” The words come out almost strained.

“No brewing stands allowed in the base,” Dream shrugs as if to say *rules are rules*, “unless you’ve got one. If you’re that worried about his *pain*,” he says that last word like it’s a joke, “kill him. Make him bleed out from that wrist just to be sure, and the revival will take care of the rest.”

Punz tries to make himself move automatically, making it so far as crouching down beside Tommy and reaching toward him without recoiling away.

“No...” Tommy croaks, struggling to almost crawl to put some distance between them, injured wrist still cradled to his chest. “*No no no no no...*” Tommy mumbles helplessly.

Punz doesn’t know how to explain that he’s sort of almost trying to help, that he just wants to kill him to make his wrist fucking hurt less. Instead, Punz stands, turns around, and leaves. He hadn’t *really* wanted to help Tommy, surely. He hadn’t really been scared for that stupid fucking kid, not when he’s the one who dragged him out here. He’d just wanted him to stop whining. His hysterics made him uncomfortable, obviously. That was all. He walks down the tunnel until he can no longer hear Tommy crying, and he has to admit, that knot of pain in his stomach settles.

He just needs to remember to keep his distance.

~

Wilbur is not going to kill himself. He’s committed himself to that at least, even if only out of grudging understanding of Tubbo’s logic and maybe a decent bit of guilt over how much he owes that kid, but nonetheless, alive he shall remain for now.

Tubbo thinks he might know something. He thinks that by some fucking miracle, Wilbur might have some tiny key that will lead them to Tommy. He has nothing. Dream is a deranged fucking mess with a god complex, but he’s also horribly careful and precise. Nothing Wilbur knows will get them any closer to Tommy.

And there is fucking Sapnap working away, planning patrols, talking to Tubbo. Wasn’t *he* supposed to be the one who knew Dream best? What’s he even doing here? He had been there alongside Tubbo, Techno, and that Ranboo kid to chase down Dream and Tommy. *Why?* In what world had Sapnap ever done more than lick Dream’s boot?

What if he is why they found you instead of Tommy? I mean, why didn’t they catch up when Dream was grabbing you in the base? Out of everyone on this fucking server— Why him?

The crowd on the platforms of New L’Manberg disperse, Tubbo following Ranboo back into his little home, hopefully to get some rest, and Sapnap begins to make his way toward the

Prime Path. Wilbur, following some peculiar, manic impulse, quickly scrambles to his feet and all but runs to follow him.

“*Hey, Sapnap!*” Wilbur has absolutely no volume control, he catches up to Sapnap and immediately shouts at him breathlessly.

“Fuck—” Sapnap almost squeaks, hand to his chest. “Oh my god, you scared me. Uh. Hey, Wilbur,” Sapnap stares at him with wide eyes.

Wilbur laughs with something a bit too vicious behind it. “Oh, sorry about that! Ha, you know, still getting used to this whole *being alive* thing,” he smiles. And from Sapnap’s nervous look it probably appears a bit too manic to be genuine.

“Right,” is all Sapnap says. What other way is there to respond to that?

“I think it’s really great you’re so... *invested* in Tommy’s rescue, you know,” Wilbur makes sure this compliment comes across as accusatory as possible.

“Yeah. I mean, how could I not be?” Sapnap says warily, glancing back toward the prime path instead of at Wilbur’s piercing stare.

“I was thinking the opposite, actually.”

“What?” Sapnap looks back over to him now, concern quickly rising, almost stumbling over the threshold into the community house. The very place he had lost Dream.

“Well, Sapnap. I’ve been gone a *very* long time, I know,” Wilbur is patronizing him like it’s a weapon to do so. “But *last* I checked, you were Dream’s favorite bitch— Or, my apologies, his *second* favorite bitch. Would you like to fill me in on why that is no longer the case?” Wilbur walks as close behind Sapnap as he can, set on making him uncomfortable.

Sapnap stops, turning around sharply, pressing a hand to Wilbur’s chest. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Wilbur responds to Sapnap touching him about as well as a dog to someone tugging on its tail. He grabs Sapnap by the front of his shirt and slams him into the brick wall with surprising strength, barely choosing the more civilized option, the alternative being a very real urge to bite him. He’s not used to being able to use his hands to defend himself. There’s something wild behind his eyes, more than a little dangerous. The look of a man who has spent too much time existing as prey. Sapnap doesn’t push him off, he just freezes, hands raised passively. Wilbur attempts to calm himself, it looking like he’s burying the urge to tear into Sapnap’s throat. He breaks away from Sapnap’s eyes, glancing down to his own hands, unclenching his fists and letting go of his shirt, straightening it and almost apologetically brushing out the wrinkles. “How about you don’t...” Wilbur smiles, voice unnervingly soft, and inhales sharply through his nose, pausing, clearly containing something far less friendly. “How about you don’t put your fucking hands on me, considering *your* best friend has been dragging me around, tossing me which ever way he likes,” Wilbur can’t stop himself from curling his hand back into a fist, pressing against Sapnap’s chest almost with the intent to

bruise, “deciding which chunks of me to cut off,” another deep breath, a shaky laugh, “yeah?” He looks Sapnap in the eye again, *daring* him to defend himself.

“Wilbur...” Sapnap doesn’t look angry, it’s not even defensive, it’s more like *pity*. Wilbur cannot remember such a careful expression ever gracing this man’s face, maybe it’s just because Wilbur was most familiar with him in a warzone, but he had always been bravado and anger and arrogance, not *this*, not horribly, genuinely *gentle*. “I’m sorry.”

Wilbur scowls, once more wary, but this line of antagonism cannot be separated from this eager, desperate hope for an enemy to be in reach. “Do you have something to be sorry for, Sapnap?”

“I mean, maybe?” Sapnap is somehow helpless, hoping for Wilbur to give him atonement.

Wilbur’s frown deepens, rage a rooted, consuming hum in his chest. “What kind of fucking answer is that?” He snarls.

“I dunno— uh, a bad one?” Sapnap shrugs, leaning back against the wall, looking up at the old oak planks of the floor above. He knows just around the corner, on the other side of the brick, there is a tiny hole between the bricks where a bolt had landed instead of its intended target. He hasn’t slept in over 24 hours. He’s so fucking tired. He’s so fucking irritated with himself for never managing to shoot his best friend properly. “I haven’t been able to kill him yet. And Tommy is gone. And-And Dream is my responsibility, so,” he looks back down at Wilbur. “I’m sorry.”

Wilbur barely pauses to consider his words, still set on getting the answer he wants. “Your *responsibility*?” Wilbur hisses like an insult.

“Yeah,” Sapnap continues more firmly now. *This* he knows, this he will say without hesitation. “You’re right. He was my best friend. And he did this. And I didn’t stop him before he got this bad. So. It’s my job to kill him now. And to get Tommy home. *That’s* why I’m here, Wilbur. That’s it.”

Wilbur had pursued this man out of some desperate, delusional hope that he might secretly be working with Dream, that somehow he could find some channel back to that monster and his little brother already among them. Maybe that delusion hasn’t vanished, but clearly his target isn’t here. Wilbur weakens, all the hostility drained out of his posture as he stumbles back, a hand tugging at his tangled curls. “You’re—” Wilbur struggles to find the words. “You’re different.”

“Uh. Thanks?”

Wilbur nods, deciding that was the appropriate answer to what he had said. “Good.” Wilbur, rather than conclude this conversation, or offer Sapnap anything like an apology or explanation, turns around on his heels and walks back the way they had come, leaving Sapnap alone in the community house, a reminder of his failures pressing down around him. He’d missed that one fucking shot. And he would never stop feeling the price of that around his neck.

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Tommy is allowed hours of sickening peace. He remains curled on top of his thin mattress, unable to stop thinking about the pulsing pain of the burn in his wrist. He's sweaty and clammy from the ordeal. He'd puked the moment Dream dumped him back in his cell. The only thing to distract him is the terrible thought that right now Dream has a compass tucked away in his inventory pointing right at him. It's just a needle showing a direction, but it feels horribly like he's being watched. It's been hours. Tommy managed to sleep some and when he woke there was a tray of food waiting. He'd struggled to touch it.

Hours more have passed, maybe Tommy is overestimating out of irritation, but he could even see most of a day having passed, and no one has come to treat the burn. It's fucking damp down here— is no one worried about infection?!

Tommy is in pain, but right now, after this much time alone again, that pain feels only like fuel to his fury. Dream fucking tagged him like a dog. Tommy didn't want to get quiet again, he didn't want to get weak, but nonetheless he *had*, and Dream had still made an excuse to give him a fresh understanding of agony. Tommy is so fucking tired of it.

Dream breaks him from his solitude, but when he returns, Tommy is too pissed off to flinch. The door slides open and Dream enters. Tommy doesn't bother moving. He stares at the faintly glowing compass now hanging from Dream's belt with visceral hatred.

"Get up," Dream orders.

"Why?" Tommy asks, voice still weak from sobbing until he was hoarse, but he still manages to sound accusing.

"Because I'm not finished with you, yet," Dream says irritably. "I gave you plenty of time to rest, no need to look so ungrateful. Maybe if you're good I'll give you a health pot or something."

Tommy sits up slowly. "What?"

"Come on. I need to explain something to you," he nods back out into the corridor, heading off without bothering to check if Tommy is following. He knows he is. He can probably see the needle turning.

Tommy still can't help but keep his injured wrist held to his chest. The weight of the metal is unfamiliar still, but he can barely notice it underneath the brutal sting of the wound. Dream walks forward down the main corridor, deeper and deeper into whatever chunk of earth that underwater cave exists within. Dream goes past the room with the farm, and at the very end of the hall, Tommy sees obsidian. He stops, and for a moment, all that fury drains out of him and is replaced by cold dread.

"I... I didn't do anything wrong," Tommy whispers frantically. "Please— I d-didn't— I'm sorry I struggled—" He thought he'd run out of tears, but a lump forms in his throat, and with it the anger returns, this isn't fucking *fair*— "I haven't done anything wrong, I haven't, I— *I haven't done anything wrong!*"

“Tommy!” Dream shouts over him. “Shut up. I’m not locking you in here. Just– Just come over here. Now. Or maybe I will.”

Tommy doesn’t know where he gets the willpower, but he crosses that threshold. This room is *even fucking smaller*. Tommy thinks he might faint, or start clawing at the walls already. It’s 2x2, walls of obsidian, and absolutely nothing else.

“Do you feel that, Tommy?”

“Y-Yes,” Tommy says shakily. *Like the whole world is fucking closing in on you.*

“That’s mining fatigue,” Dream says.

Tommy snaps out of some sort of daze. “What?”

“If you try to dig out from any direction, you know, instead of trying to swim, eventually you hit mining fatigue. On the other side of this, there’s an ocean monument,” Dream brushes a hand against the wall almost fondly. “Stole that one from Sam, I’ll admit.” A pause, Tommy says nothing, only watches him, waiting in terror. “Come on,” Dream turns back around, heading the way they’d come.

He continues monologuing. “If you somehow, against all known odds, managed to escape from here, you’ve earned it. I mean, if you can get out of *this*?” Dream gestures grandly to the system of tunnels they now navigate, heading toward the slightly brighter light of the dome. “You’d have won, fair and square,” he laughs.

Tommy follows him. And suddenly the pain in his wrist feels weak, infinitesimal, because Dream seems to *mean it*. It’s a double edged sword. Dream is so certain that Tommy cannot escape he is saying this in such a way that he fully believes it. Both parts of it. He does not believe Tommy can escape therefore he believes if he did he’d have earned it. Dream wants a game. Games can be won.

They cross over into the dome and it’s like that vast expanse, the weight of the world and a million gallons of water pressing down on them, it feels like an echo of his epiphany. He’s in pain. He’s exhausted. He’s weak. He’s scared out of his fucking mind. And Dream has given him an opening, sure, it’s a plot for the mad, but that suits both of them perfectly. Dream thinks he literally cannot escape. Then Tommy will spend every moment looking for a way out. If Dream wants him to play, for the rat to run the maze, fine. But Tommy is going to get out. He’s going to *win*. Or at least he’s going to make sure Dream loses with him.

“Okay. Promise it.”

Dream turns around, “what?” He doesn’t even sound annoyed, just puzzled. Punz is barely on Tommy’s radar, looking up from his seat on top of one of the chests.

Tommy feels like he’s about to catch fire, there is something burning inside of him, nothing as feeble as molten metal or charred flesh, something stronger, something that refuses to die and maybe it’s dangerous but he doesn’t care. So he stares Dream down and he demands it– not pleading, pleading Dream will gladly refuse, but a *challenge*. “Promise it in front of

Punz and me and mean it. You said you wouldn't lie to me, and I know you bend the truth like a fucking bendy straw, but this is just a promise. Can't bend it without it being a cheap shot dickheads make when they're losing. And like you said, you know I can't actually get out, so no harm, right?"

"Huh," Dream considers him carefully, that same assessing tilt of the head Tommy can read as *intrigued*. Maybe even tempted. He laughs. "Now *this*, this is going to be fun." He pauses another moment, weighing the price. "Fair, if you earn your freedom, if you escape, you can go."

Dream is so sure he's a god. Tommy remembers stories, stories from Techno told around a fire in Pogopia, late into the night, stories where the heroes get away from the gods. Maybe they don't *beat* them, but sometimes they win anyway. Tommy reaches out his right hand, shake on it or it's worthless.

"And, obviously, I'm still allowed to punish you for *failed* escape attempts. Why would you earn a reward for being a failure?" Dream adds coolly. "Because, however impressive it would be if you actually earned your freedom, you trying to leave is still wrong. It still needs consequences."

Tommy frowns, but nods, hand still extended. He expected something like that. Fine.

"A successful escape earns your freedom," Dream begins to offer his own hand. "But then I'd have to get Wilbur, right?"

Tommy recoils, pulling his hand back, not yet giving in, but on the defensive now. "The fuck do you mean?"

"Come on now, *you* escape, you earn freedom. Wilbur hasn't earned anything. I *gave* it to him. He owes every breath of free air to me. Right now I'm not interested. I don't need him, but if I lose you, I'll need *someone* to work on the revive book with, right?" Dream thinks he's back in control, less curiosity, more arrogance as he tilts back on his heels, hands in his pockets, mulling it over. "I'll be fair, I'll be *generous*, really. One escape earns one freedom. And you can decide who gets it, right?"

Tommy does the same thing Dream has been doing. He weighs the pros and cons, the risk versus the reward. He thinks about how he's going to play the game. No more surviving, it's moves and countermoves now. "Alright, fine," Tommy grins and however mad it is, he means every bit of that vicious joy. "But Wil is *out* now, eh? Hunting *your* ass. You'd have to catch him first. And if you come after him, all the better, right?" Tommy takes a step forward. He feels like a god himself. "However fast you are, however tricky, you'll be running down the barrel of a gun. Every fucking eye is looking out for you, man. And, well, I think Wilbur knows how to shoot fish in a barrel," he gives Punz an appraising glance, as if the two of them were in agreement. Even if Dream doesn't care, he knows it'll unsettle Punz. This is not about Tommy's faith in Wilbur as a *hunter*— fuck no— but as someone who is currently surrounded by all the protections Tommy had to actually fight to thwart and get away from. Wilbur is not alone.

There's a weighted pause, Tommy watching that mask despite knowing there's no expression to read, the burning of his wrist like a fuzz of static in the background. Everything Tommy has done has spelled insolence and danger. He's being too loud. He's talking like he and Dream are equals. But Dream doesn't hit him, not even an insult. Instead, he offers a hand.

"Alright, Tommy. You're on."

They shake on it. It's familiar. A different time, discs could be traded alongside lives and that meant something. Really, Tommy doesn't think the game has changed that much. It's still him and Dream.

Chapter End Notes

I usually try to space out the batshit crazy stuff, but. uh. I'm just going for it ya know.

Yes, this fic is going to have a plot— yayy. Just not. One of rescue. Obviously.

As always, feedback is cherished <3

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

CW: hey, uh. violence. some gore. referenced suicide, self harm. y'know how it is.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Punz has to make his return to the Mainlands, and Dream decides to see him out. Tommy watches the pair of them drink water breathing potions with blatant envy, but it's not like there's anything he can do as the pair leave him behind. Besides, now Tommy has a goal.

Punz and Dream make it to the surface at the same time, Dream having slowed down to compensate for Punz's not yet healed leg. The nearest bit of land is a rough swim away, so they finish the last section in a boat together, quiet save for Dream's efforts at rowing, and where they land isn't the most hospitable. Desert followed by dense jungle. Eventually they'd get back to plains if they kept heading east, and the other nearest coast, an even longer boat ride, is cold, towering spruce and rough terrain. None of it has been touched. The nearest Nether portal is in a patch of wilderness as nondescript as the rest about 600 blocks away. They are thousands of blocks away from anything anywhere, at least a thousand just through the Nether. They are as close to nowhere as one could possibly get.

It's a shit walk home for Punz. He doesn't trust anyone enough to activate a stasis pearl for him at the other end. They would ask questions eventually. So, he'll walk. He'll use enderpearls and tridents when convenient– tridents must stay in their enderchests while in the bunker, for the same reason there are no brewing stands or Nether portals down there– and try and find his way to the nearest highway on the Nether roof.

“What're you gonna do, then?” Punz trudges off the beach, armor heavy on his shoulders, shaking out his wet hair, still squinting in the sun even after a good while back on the surface.

Dream adjusts his mask, “oh, you know,” he shrugs. Dream destroys the boat, not a trace would be left of them along this desolate coastline. “Tommy's got me feeling inspired.”

Punz buries the prickle on the back of his neck and continues. “Right. I'm thinking I'll check in again today, but maybe dial it back after this. They don't really expect me to be this invested, mercenary and all.”

“Actually,” Dream tilts his head, rummaging through his inventory. “I have something else for you to do.” He offers Punz a stack of TNT. “I'm assuming you can come by the redstone and invis pots by yourself?”

Punz accepts warily. “And what exactly is it you want me to do?”

“Thought it’d be obvious,” Dream laughs, “I want you to set up traps. To... discourage them from looking for me. *And* I told Tommy back before his first little escape attempt, I couldn’t think of a good enough way to punish him, so I was gonna hurt everyone else. Set up traps. Let me know who gets caught in the crossfire.”

Punz stares at the tnt. *You don’t care about these people. Why would you? Eventually you’ll be able to outlive them all.*

Punz sighs, “seems like a lot of work. I don’t see a point, really.”

Dream takes a step closer, hands clasped behind his back, leaning forward inquisitively like there isn’t a hint of accusation behind his words. “Would you prefer *I* set them up? I mean, the reason I asked *you* is because you actually need to be around the Mainlands sometimes, and I’d imagine you’d want to know where all the traps are. And if I set them up...” Dream tuts him softly. “Well, I wouldn’t want to get you blown up. And unless you’re lucky enough to have a ghost, if your body is destroyed...” he shrugs. “The book has its limitations. I haven’t worked out all the wrinkles yet, you know how it is.”

Of course Dream has an answer. Logical enough to not be worth contesting, but also clearly a fucking threat.

“And I was thinking once everyone starts panicking about the explosives, you could have a couple more hero moments where you... *catch one at the last second*,” Dream dramatically pretends to swoon. Punz is unamused. “Save the day! Stuff like that to really keep you in their good books.”

Punz nods curtly. “Fine. I’ll do it.”

“And hey, if anyone dies who was on their last life, maybe I’ll show up and barter for whoever’s soul it is. Might be fun,” Dream says cockily.

“That’s dangerous.”

“Yeah, what can I say,” Dream shrugs. “I’m... confident in my abilities.”

Punz can only think of Tommy’s words, whispered and offered like a sacred truth. *He thinks he’s a god.*

“Okay. Fine, you go do whatever it is you do, then. It’ll take me a while to get back, so. Don’t expect anything to be done today,” Punz frowns, still just staring at the tnt in his hands. He puts it in his inventory.

“Hey, no rush. We have... *forever*, remember?” Dream laughs, before sauntering away from the coast, toward the jungle just beyond an expanse of desert.

~

Tubbo sleeps for eleven hours and for a brief moment when he wakes, he forgets what he’s lost. The feeling which comes crashing down on him is horribly close to grief. Tubbo feels Ranboo’s absence on the other side of the bed. They had decided to crash in Ranboo’s house

in New L'Manberg, if only because it's closer, even if it's more cramped. From over the edge of the loft, Tubbo can hear rustling, the sound of something sizzling in a pan.

Okay, Mr. President, what are we going to try today? Sapnap set up patrols, they'll be working out from the locations we at least know about. They hopefully know to look out for anything underwater. Wilbur said an underwater cave...

Okay, today we should set up a brewing station. Anyone who can't go look can help gather ingredients. We'll churn out water breathing and night vision potions, start searching the seas.

Tubbo closes his eyes against the gentle light filtering through the windows, feeling as though a great weight were crushing down on his chest.

Start searching the seas. Right. Searching whole oceans, using a starting point that is based on nothing. Where we found Wilbur is meaningless. A dead end tunnel in the Nether is fucking meaningless.

When do you stop?

Tubbo shuts down that train of thought then and there, shuts down any thought besides getting out of bed and climbing the ladder down to the main room of the little house.

"Morning," Ranboo says, dishing out eggs. "You sleep okay?"

Tubbo nods, sitting down at the tiny, rickety table shoved in the corner. This house is almost functional for one person, and arguably difficult to navigate with just one more. Ranboo gets together two plates.

"Coffee?" Ranboo asks.

Tubbo starts to shake his head before he reconsiders. He cannot afford any exhaustion.

"Yeah, if you don't mind."

"No, no not at all," Ranboo is too kind, too easy-going as he politely refuses to bring up the bitter ache still hanging in the air.

"Any word?" Tubbo asks.

"Uh, Sapnap went home to rest a little after we did, Phil said. And only a few patrols are still out, I think. I think Techno went home after he dropped me off. No one..." Ranboo pauses with a frown, picking at his eggs mindlessly. "No one has reported anything. Good or bad."

Tubbo nods. He'd expected as much.

Ranboo is quiet. This is the part where he's supposed to read Tubbo's silence for the dread it is and softly say, *"we're gonna find him. We will."* With enough certainty that maybe Tubbo can make it through the day a little easier, but this time Ranboo says nothing. They eat.

Tubbo fills Ranboo in on his plans as they head out into the server, Ranboo quick to support it.

“I’m... I’m sorry I can’t search the ocean stuff, but I can help brew potions,” Ranboo offers.

“It’s alright, bossman. I’d never expect that of you,” Tubbo puts a gentle hand on his arm. He frowns, thinking it over. “Oh.”

“What?”

“Well, I’d expect—“ Tubbo trails off, lost in thought, bitterness rising. “I suppose it makes sense, doesn’t it? Tommy got a message to you through endermen, so Dream takes him far underwater.”

“Oh,” Ranboo says more softly, dread a deep ache in his chest. This is their second try. Dream has only had time to learn. And whatever efforts or progress they’d made to protect Tommy, either they only worked while he was still here, or Dream had already cut that thread. Tommy cannot be guarded, there is no lodestone, no message sent through endermen... Ranboo won’t voice it aloud, but right now Wilbur’s plot to get a message through Ghostbur is the best one they have.

Well, Dream probably won’t ever let Tommy get ahold of coordinates again, so scratch that. He probably drilled Tommy for every detail of his last escape to make sure it never happened again.

“Come on. Let’s collect brewing stands—“ Tubbo’s attempt at shaking Ranboo out of his stupor hits him like a rocket to the chest. He stops. *Let’s collect brewing stands.*

Let’s sell drugs on the server.

Let’s start a nation together.

“Fuck—“ Tubbo stumbles forward.

“Tubbo? What is it?”

Tubbo just shakes his head wordlessly, covering his face as it feels like something is laying on his chest. He just needs to calm down.

It only gets worse, and Tubbo collapses against the post holding up the platforms of New L’Manberg.

“Tubbo?!” Ranboo has no idea, how could he? “Are you okay?!” Ranboo kneels beside him, a hand on his shoulder, but Tubbo cannot catch his breath.

Tubbo doesn’t say a word. He’s gasping for air, fighting back tears. He feels like he’s dying. He knows what that’s like.

Not as well as Tommy does.

The panic deepens, and Tubbo makes some horrible, choked imitation of a laugh, he feels numb, pins and needles cover his skin and there is only his lungs desperately gasping for air but it's like there just isn't enough for him anymore. His vision blurs, for a horrifying moment he thinks he's gone blind again, but no, he feels tears sting his cheek, he's crying. That is not enough relief to calm him, not when he can't fucking *breathe*—

“Please, Tubbo. You gotta— You gotta slow down—“ Ranboo is frantic, he doesn't know what to do, he doesn't know what *happened*, one second Tubbo was relatively fine and the next he couldn't stand.

“Tubbo?” A worried voice speaks up behind them.

Ranboo turns back sharply, Wilbur stands frozen just outside his father's home.

“I don't— I don't know how to—“ Ranboo is pleading.

Wilbur looks between them and it's like a haze lifts, a tumultuous storm insists on calm, and Wilbur is there. He comes and joins them on the ground. “Tubbo, you're alright, man. Deep breaths. Just, inhale— *one, two, three, four*— good, good don't exhale yet— *one, two, three, four, five*—“ Tubbo breaks with a sob, exhaling sharply, struggling to draw breath, and Wilbur remains utterly calm. “Okay, that's alright, just try and hold it a little longer next time, it's okay, man. You're gasping, let's try it again, inhale— Ranboo, can you copy too?— inhale, *one, two, three, four*— now we hold for seven, okay? *One, two, three, four, five, six, seven*, and exhale *slow*, man, really really slow, *one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight*. Good, that's— that's loads better, let's go again, yeah? Inhale, *one, two, three, four*. Hold, *one, two, three, four, five, six, seven*. Good— and exhale, *one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight...*”

They continue like that for a while, Ranboo holding Tubbo's hand, Wilbur sat in front of him, just breathing, and Tubbo doesn't know what to do with that face finally looking like the man he'd once trusted with his life.

Tubbo is breathing on his own, Wilbur sits back, with a relieved half sort of smile, like he's unsure if he should stay now. Tubbo scrunches up his face as he makes one last effort to bury a sob, but he can't, not after Wilbur was *Wilbur* again, so instead he falls forward, wraps his arms around Wilbur's frail shoulders, and finally stops fighting back tears. Wilbur is startled for maybe a moment, but then he's holding him, shushing him gently like nothing has changed. In the woods mere days ago, they had held each other, swallowed by mutual terror, but now Wilbur has the fortitude to simply pretend to be calm, if only for a little while longer.

Fucking hell— Tubbo is *eighteen years old*. He's a fucking *kid*, and what the fuck is Wilbur supposed to do with that? This time he is free and still just as helpless as when he'd been trying to save Tommy while still dead.

Tubbo mumbles something into Wilbur's shirt.

“What?”

Tubbo pulls back, taking a deep breath, staring at the wooden slats beneath them. “I want to make water breathing potions. And probably night vision too. A lot of them.”

“Oh,” Wilbur doesn’t know why he feels surprised. He wants them to look for Tommy whatever it takes. Somehow actually trying makes the desperation of it all sharper. “Right. I... I know where we can get some brewing stands, yeah?”

The brutal irony does not evade either of them. They gather brewing stands and whatever ingredients had remained there from Ghostbur’s abandoned sewer home. Phil helps.

And what place remains, one designed and suited for brewing, if not the perfect replica of the Camarvan.

Tubbo and Wilbur don’t voice it aloud, but as they set up shop, the weight of it is like a knife in both of their chests.

They start with their collection of awkward potions. Tubbo and Wilbur let Phil and Ranboo grind up the blaze rods, because how can Wilbur not think of his bold, ignorant claim *we’re on the right side of history* as he showed off their haul all that time ago. For Wilbur it, of course, feels like decades. But for Tubbo it feels like decades as well.

Tubbo goes and gathers carrots from Tommy’s garden, refusing to let himself think about or even look at the house just beside him. Phil offers to take up fishing to gather puffer fish. Ranboo already has an obscene amount of gold for the carrots.

As those three go to gather their assigned ingredients, Wilbur is left staring at a row of three brewing stands, the sharp scent of blaze powder stinging his nose. They hadn’t really made potions all that long in the grand scheme of L’Manberg’s history, but that had been what they’d done before there was war, so it matters. It feels louder.

This replica is too good. Wilbur can feel the memories crawling up the walls, he can hear Tommy’s brash, young, loyal little voice and Wilbur hates it.

Tubbo returns first. He understands when Wilbur stops leaning against the counter and heads for the door.

“I can’t- I can’t, I just need some air-“ Wilbur starts walking and he doesn’t stop.

Wilbur takes the nearest exit out of L’Manberg and of course ends up right by Tommy’s house. He doesn’t look at it. He doesn’t pause. He just walks a little faster, sticking only to the prime path.

That is, until he sees a glimpse of stone, of a hole in the ground just over the hillside. There is no reason for him to know what it is at a glance, but he has a sinking feeling either way. He stops and approaches the cliff side. He looks down. There is no coherent thought or logic which he follows, but he finds himself stumbling further down the prime path until he finds a less steep ledge to scramble down, scraping his palms on the rocks just enough to sting, but really he’s just lucky his newly alive clumsiness didn’t make him break his neck.

Wilbur approaches the grave.

Here lies Tommyinnit.

Brother, soldier, friend.

You can let go now.

Without much choice, Wilbur feels a bubbling, hysterical laugh fall from his lips. Other than that strange, unnerving giggle, he doesn't move, merely stares transfixed at the stone. There is a poorly undug hole in front of him. It's about six feet deep. It's empty. And Wilbur's first fleeting coherent thought since he'd left the Camarvan is the inexplicable urge to hop down inside of it. As far as Wilbur's intrusive thoughts go, that one is almost silly. For some fucking reason, *all* of this feels *silly* to him. It's all just ridiculous, nonsensical nonsense and Wilbur, the *perfect* cosmic joke, the misfired chekhov's gun, the man who failed to martyr himself *thrice*, escaped from hell on a *fucking technicality* alongside the whims of a mad man, and he cannot *wait* to crawl back into a grave.

Well, not *back* into a grave. That would imply he ever had one to begin with.

That's the thought that breaks one more shred of sanity he'd still been clinging to, and Wilbur is at least lucky enough to fall backwards onto the earth still soft from being undug instead of forwards into the pit as he laughs hysterically on the ground, tears streaming from his eyes at the thought of what a fucking *overachiever he is*, after everything he's *ruined*, he's going to take one last thing from his little brother. Why not. He's already lost Tommy his freedom, why doesn't he just take his spot in the resting place Tommy had been loved enough to deserve.

Back at the Camarvan when Ranboo and Phil return, Tubbo says Wilbur went for a smoke. It's a fair lie, one Tubbo almost believes himself. Still, better to save Wilbur even more people fussing over him. Tubbo understood how irritating that could be.

"He did?" Phil frowns. "It feels like such a little thing now, but he needs to stop that shit. He doesn't need something to mess him up any more."

"Ah, we're talking about me, then?" Wilbur had returned from his apparent smoke break, and none of them, Tubbo included, know what to do with the sight of him bedraggled and covered in dirt before them. His eyes are red and a bit puffy.

"You alright?" Ranboo says, voice just a bit higher in his concern.

Wilbur gives him a weird look, like his asking is the peculiar part of this situation. "Fucking dandy," he says dryly. "Why're you all standing around? Aren't there potions to be making? Shoo," he waves them away from the doorway before walking past to the row of brewing stands. They all pretend not to notice Wilbur's hands still shaking as he takes the bottles off the stand and checks their consistency. "So, I think we prioritize water breathing, yeah? Someone wanna get me a pufferfish?"

Phil is quick to oblige, and none of them say another word about Wilbur looking like he'd just crawled out of a gutter.

So the day goes.

Two hours and over a dozen potions later, there's the distant sound of something familiar to all ears present save Ranboo's, however faint, that sound the three of them could recognize anywhere.

Somewhere else, somewhere too close for comfort, TNT has just gone off.

~

Tommy sits on the little chest full of notebooks in the corner of his cell. The door to the cell remains open. It unnerves him, his ability to wander the corridors. He almost wishes he were shut in. It's the same as he'd thought since Dream had first promised he'd have full run of the base; it's just a bigger cell. The few intersecting narrow corridors, the only open space being that stupid dome, it feels more claustrophobic somehow than if he had been sealed into one room. Sealed in, he could've pretended any amount of open space existed just beyond his sight. Maybe another dauntingly big hall inside a mountain. Maybe, if he were daring, a way outside.

Dream knew what he was doing. Tommy could see all of it. That illusory freedom meant he could not give himself some naive hope that just around some hidden corner there was a way out. No wonder Dream had agreed to Tommy's game. Tommy doesn't even have anywhere to *attempt* to look for trouble. There is nothing, nowhere to start, and thus the door stays open.

Not to say Tommy isn't trying his best.

Right now Tommy sits on top of the chest instead of his bed because he's currently trying to saw through the iron band around his wrist by wedging it against the corner of his metal sink.

"You're both *metal*, so how come you can't break this shit, then?" Tommy mutters crossly to the sink, kicking it between attempts. "You're thicker than this stupid fucking thing, shouldn't that mean you're stronger or whatever the fuck?!"

Tommy gives it another try. He thinks the weakest point of the fucking thing would surely be where Dream had welded on that ring on to seal it. It was an annoying shape, the little ring about the size of his finger still pressed into the burn, the curve of it disrupting the rest of the band which fit his wrist perfectly. Tommy doesn't know why he didn't just fucking close the loop. He could've just made the band a bit too big and used some tool to pinch it closed. Dickhead.

Tommy, as he had been for the past hour, continues to ignore the blood dripping down his arm. The feeble attempt at scabbing the burn had managed without a health pot had cracked just from him moving, so now, with the pointed corner of the sink digging in, instead of cutting into the iron band, it had made quick work of deepening the wound on his wrist until it was a nasty cut as well.

Tommy hisses as his arm slips and the cut widens, *but* through the blood Tommy can at least see he's scratching the metal. And hey, if the bleeding continues in earnest, Tommy will have finally pushed himself enough to slit his wrist, just like Dream wanted.

Tommy knows that, unlike from a neck wound, he's still got a pretty decent amount of time before he bleeds out. Tommy pauses, frowning at the flow of blood which has gone from a few rivulets down his arm to a steady stream, his arm feeling oddly tingly. Okay. Maybe not much time.

"Well, no point in pussyfootin' around for safety's sake or whatever the fuck," Tommy says almost cheerfully, raising his left arm with his right so he can slam it down on the edge of the sink in order to crack it open. "*Fuck!*" Tommy screams, falling back on the ground and cradling his wrist to his chest, kicking his feet out furiously. He's earned a fucking tantrum. The metal does have a small dent in it, but that just gives it one more fucking place to dig into his wrist, not to mention the jarring pain that had shuddered up his arm. That's definitely going to bruise, not even mentioning the blood slickening both of his arms now and soaking his shirt.

Tommy doesn't want to get up anymore. He's tired. His wrist is throbbing and he has a feeling any more efforts are just going to make it worse. The stupid fucking band was measured out to his wrist perfectly and Tommy had of course found a way to instead make the stupid fucking thing just a *little* bendy so it would dig in.

Tommy stares with bleary rage at the band. At the little cube half encased in metal on the top.

"Oh, I was fuckin... I was fuckin stupid, okay," Tommy had wanted the fucking thing *off* of him, a reasonable request, but the thing was almost shaped like a big ring. It was easy to break the gem off the top of a ring. Much easier than trying to break the band outright. Tommy had no intention of trying to shatter the thing made with *Netherite*, but if he could just crack the thinner bits of iron holding it in place...

"One m-more try," Tommy staggers to his feet, almost falling over he felt so dizzy, yet again he uses his right arm to hold up his left like a hammer, his left feeling far more tingly alongside the sharper sting of the burn, and goes to bring the lodestone down right on the edge of the sink.

"What're you doing?"

That cold voice is the last thing Tommy hears as his vision blurs and, startled, he misses the sink, his arm getting thrown to the floor pulling him down with it so instead of hitting the iron or even his wrist, Tommy slams his own forehead into the edge of the sink.

It's almost impressive. He was about to bleed out and Tommy found a way to make himself fall unconscious even faster.

~

Maybe they shouldn't be so willing to run toward that sound, but Tubbo, Wilbur, and Phil take off running towards it immediately, Ranboo close behind.

There's a small crater in Tommy's front yard.

“*Niki!*” Wilbur does not fall into an empty grave, instead one perhaps already occupied. “Oh fuck– no *no no no*– oh *god*, oh fuck–” There’s blood burst across the ground and Niki isn’t moving.

Tubbo feels horror twofold. Tubbo had been meters away from this spot, gathering fucking *carrots*, mere hours ago. And it had been Niki instead. “Wilbur, her leg,” Tubbo says weakly.

“G-Get me a health pot! Quickly, please!” Wilbur screams up at them. He finds her pulse pushing on fiercely. “A-And I need– Oh, fuck, I need a r-rope or-or something–”

Ranboo scrambles to take off his belt, throwing it down to him. Wilbur takes it, pulling it taut just below Niki’s right knee. The blood flow slows from the mangled remains of her leg. Phil has already taken off running back toward New L’Manberg.

“H-Help me, I can’t– I can’t get her out–” Wilbur struggles to lift her. He can’t see very well and it’s not just from the gunpowder stinging in his eyes. Wilbur blinks away tears, refocusing on Tubbo hopping down to help him. The two of them manage to get her out, Ranboo helping to lift her back onto solid ground. Phil returns with health pots and a golden apple. “P-Please, Niki, oh *god*–” Wilbur supports her head as Phil carefully pours the potion down her throat, Ranboo taking a splash potion to her damaged leg.

“Punz,” Tubbo looks up at the stunned figure coming down the prime path. “C-Can you find Ponk? We need a doctor.”

Punz is pale as a sheet, looking like he’s about to be sick, but he nods and turns around, running toward Lemon City.

He didn’t get close enough for them to see the redstone still staining his fingertips.

Chapter End Notes

ohh I didn't get where I wanted to with this chapter but how could I not end it there. Like come on.

Sorry Niki you're a queen and you're gonna look so cool with a prosthetic to match Ponk's :(

Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

CW: descriptions of injury and gore, violence. I know I say that a lot for this fic. But this one is. Uh. A tad Much. Trying to think of how to warn for it– almost medical horror? I mean, think the paralysis chapter from back in the day, but not quite. How about threats of paralysis? Yeah. Good luck, folks.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tommy has several hours in the void to panic about what waits for him in the living world, but he spends most of that time distraught and furious at the fact that even dead that stupid fucking iron band remains around his wrist.

“No– No *fucking* way, that’s– that’s not fucking *fair!*” Tommy manages to get to his obsidian floor with surprising speed, if only to try and break his own wrist against the ground. Of course, it doesn’t work. It makes sense. Whatever bloody clothes Tommy died in carried over, the band was part of that, like a respawn taking clothes but not armor or what was in his inventory. Why couldn’t this *fucking count as armor?* Tommy’s anger turns sharply to grief. Tommy holds onto his own wrist, feeling the metal so stiffly bound to skin. At least the burn is healed. The dent in the metal is uncomfortable, not painful. Still, Tommy pushes against it, like he’s trying to slide it off his wrist, but he can’t even get it past the bones there, let alone the issue of his hand. He curls on his side, wrist cradled close. Dream wasn’t supposed to fucking *follow him here*. Dead is the only place left he has that was some fucked up illusion of safe.

Tommy shuts his eyes tightly, a whimpering sob rising from his chest, sharp and shuddering gasps followed by tears. He remains there, helpless in the dark, for far too long. Sobs return to shouting like the tide coming in.

“L-Let me go... let me fucking go–” Tommy’s voice is higher and weaker as yet again he bangs his wrist against the ground. “*LET ME GO!*” He tries to slam his wrist into the ground, not caring as his fist is bruised instead. The bruises won’t stay. “*LET ME FUCKING GO!*” Tommy screams himself hoarse. Tommy stops struggling, his right hand wrapped around the metal. It’s not fucking *fair*. “I don’t want it... I don’t want it fucking on me...” He mumbles weakly. It’s painful in what it symbolizes and irritating as an object. The cool metal, every time he moves it hits his bones almost painfully.

It couldn’t move enough to get that far.

Tommy opens his eyes.

The iron band is bigger.

“HA!” Tommy cackles, scrambling to force the band off, not caring as it hurts and threatens to break his thumb. It’s just big enough to pull free without breaking anything, it clatters to the ground. Tommy feels almost giddy, he grabs the ring and throws it as far as he can, it skidding away into darkness. “*FUCK YOU!*” Tommy shouts into the void with vicious rage at an inanimate object. He lays back, finally feeling an ounce of peace.

Maybe Tommy should realize by now that peace should be taken as a warning.

“Wake up.”

~

Niki wakes up to the sight of her dead best friend holding her hand. It takes her a few minutes more realize what it cost for her to finally have him beside her again. Wilbur wakes up with a start the moment she lets go. He watches her, slow to catch up, as Niki pulls back the blanket draped over her to reveal white bandages around her calf, ending in a stump.

“Niki...” Wilbur’s voice is hoarse. He doesn’t say anything else.

Niki reaches down to brush against the bandages, pulling back sharply. Niki’s eyes are watering, her lip trembles, but her words come out shockingly steady.

“What’re you doing here, Wil?”

They’re in one of the houses in New L’Manberg. She thinks it might be Phil’s, if Wilbur is here. She’s laid out on a small sofa that’s been fitted into a bed. Niki is having a hard time remembering the few seconds before she woke up here.

“I was just...” Wilbur doesn’t know what to say. “Fuck, I am so sorry, Niki, I–”

“What are you sorry for?”

“I– What?”

Niki finally looks away from her leg. “What do you have to be sorry for?”

Wilbur shrinks back in his chair, but he knows she isn’t talking about her miserable circumstances now. “Too many things to name,” he says quietly.

Niki nods curtly. “One day I want you to name them,” she swings her legs off the bed, stopping with a heavy sigh, staring at the ground. “After we get Tommy back.”

It’s generous. It’s more than Wilbur deserves.

He nods quickly, standing up, looking for the crutch Ponk had left for her. “H-Here,” he gives it to her. “A-And if you want, I can support you. Or– Or carry you, or whatever the case may–”

“Where is everyone? Tubbo and all them. They probably have questions,” Niki uses the crutch well enough, walking out of the house at a determined limp.

“Well, Jack only just left. Just stepped out for a minute. Other than that he’s been glued to your side, really. I think he went to get food?”

Wilbur was right on that account, as Jack almost drops the bag of goods he has as he runs to Niki’s side.

“Niki! You’re out here— Do you want to sit down?” Jack is immediately frantic.

“I’m okay, Jack,” Niki manages a smile.

The others on the platform are an unusual collection.

Tubbo, Sapnap, Phil, Punz, HBomb, and Ranboo all wait around.

“I’m gonna go get Ponk now that you’re awake,” Ranboo gets to his feet, typing out a message on his comm.

“Ranboo, just message them. No one goes anywhere if it’s not essential,” Sapnap says.

Ranboo frowns before stopping, nodding and doing as he said.

“What’re you all standing around for?” Niki asks.

“Um, to check on you. Obviously,” Jack says.

“Yeah, Niki. When you’re ready, could we talk to you about some stuff?” Sapnap is awkward and unsure. That makes more sense to her. He’s here to figure out what happened, she assumes Punz is as well.

Niki makes the mistake of starting to put weight on her right leg. She begins to fall and eight people all rush to catch her. “I’m *fine*,” she says sharply, barely allowing Jack to take her right arm around his shoulder. Already she hates this. If only for the pity.

“Everyone stop looking at me like I’m made of glass. I’m awake. Ask me something,” Niki says sharply, letting Jack walk her over to a chair HBomb had been quick to offer up.

“Okay, well, Niki. Can you tell us what you remember?” Tubbo asks.

Niki nods, struggling to focus. Her head hurts. “Well, I thought... I thought maybe I could check Tommy’s house? See if there was anything we might’ve missed? But... it wasn’t even in the front door. I *think* there might’ve been a wire? On the ground? I’m not really sure, I felt something sort of on my ankle and then...” Niki trails off. “Well, I think you know the rest.”

“If she hadn’t been wearing armor she would be dead,” Tubbo says quietly.

“Tubbo!” HBomb scolds him.

“It’s okay, H. He’s right,” Niki says. “Did anyone see what it actually was?”

Sapnap nods. “Me and Punz looked at it. There was redstone running under the ground, tnt under the path, from the looks of it. And yeah. A cut trip wire.”

Niki nods, thinking.

“Maybe it was... maybe it was just Tommy’s house, because it was *Tommy’s house*, you know?” Ranboo offers.

“Has anyone been in there recently?” Sapnap glances at Tubbo.

“No. I haven’t,” Tubbo says stiffly. He hasn’t gone closer than the garden outside. He doesn’t want to.

“So, it could’ve been old, too,” Sapnap posits.

“Well, shouldn’t we be careful?” Punz says sharply. “We can’t just *assume* that was the only place. They could be anywhere.”

Sapnap nods, grudgingly agreeing. “I don’t think anyone should go anywhere without full Netherite armor. And I think we should try to cut back on going places as much as we can until we can have some people do sweeps? Or something? And, like, maybe even more important, *no one* on one life goes anywhere without, like, someone else to walk in front of them. If that makes sense,” Sapnap falters. He’s not a fucking *leader*. He knew Dream better than most and he knew how to hunt people down, and that made him predisposed to leading the charge when they were looking for Dream *in the moment*, but the rest of it...

He wishes Tubbo were well enough to do this part. But even he never seemed inclined to leadership. What would really be great would be if Wilbur Soot were actually sane again.

That won’t be happening any time soon.

Tubbo looks irritated. “Clearly he’s doing this to stop us from looking. We can’t– We can’t *do what he wants* and stop.”

“Tubbo, we can’t expect people to go out like this,” Ranboo offers quietly.

“Yes, it’s a *volunteer basis*, like always, but you can’t fucking stop me from going out if everyone else is too scared to,” Tubbo stares at Sapnap, daring him to protest.

“Tubbo, *you’re* one of the people on one life,” Phil says gently.

Tubbo turns on him easily. “And if it were you, Phil? If Wilbur were still gone, would you listen and sit back with your one life?”

Phil wants to protest. He can’t.

Wilbur stares at his father, almost surprised that he’d even consider caring that much.

Punz sighs. “I’ll still go. I’ve got two lives to spare, so,” he shrugs.

“Really?” Sapnap looks at him, surprised. “I didn’t think you’d... It’s a big risk, man.”

Punz glances over at Niki, almost subconsciously. “And I’m willing to take it. So. Quit complaining and be grateful you have such a great person helping you.”

Ponk and Sam arrive, interrupting the subject at hand. “Er, sorry it took so long, *Sam* was a bit picky walking over here,” Ponk gives him a look.

“Can you blame me?” Sam frowns. “You’re down a life, Ponk. I’m not about to let you lose another one.” In Sam’s arms are, oddly enough, four right legs.

“Uhhh. Whatcha got there, Sam?” Ranboo asks.

“Oh! These’re leftover from when I made Ponk’s legs,” Sam says like this is an ordinary sort of statement. “They didn’t fit right and I thought maybe Niki could try them. They’re all pretty adjustable, I mean, prosthetics have to be exact, so we might get lucky. And if not, it’ll at least give me some measurements when I make her one.”

Niki looks pained for a moment. It all feels a bit more real now. “Oh. Thank you, Sam.”

“Psh, it’s not so bad, Niki,” Ponk pulls up their right pant leg to show off shining metal. “Sam is a *really* good redstone engineer. He could make just about anything.”

Sam blushes behind them. “Well, I dunno about that—”

“Quiet down, stupid! Let me talk about how cool you are!” Ponk teases him. “And shush. I gotta look at my patient.”

Ponk begins checking Niki over, checking to be sure her pupils are dilating and so on.

Sam refocuses on the others gathered. “Did you guys find anything?”

“It was simple redstone. TNT under the path,” Sapnap shrugs. “Nothing useful.”

“Well, there’s something else we’ve got to consider too,” Jack winces. “Who set the trap?”

“Dream, obviously,” Punz quips back immediately. “Have you been missing the plot or something?”

Jack looks offended for a moment before persisting. “I mean, I guess the guy could’ve snuck in with invis, but...” he trails off. “I dunno.”

Tubbo and Ranboo exchange adjacent, indirect glances.

“Well, who the hell would it be?” Punz remains doubtful. “I mean, Dream’s own best friend is the one helping hunt him down,” Punz gives Sapnap a nod. “I mean, the closest thing to a link to Dream we have is Wilbur, his *former hostage*,” Punz laughs. “I’m still betting he just used invis.”

“Well, actually,” Tubbo speaks carefully.

“What?” Phil gets sharp, but that’s because he’s caught on as well.

“Wilbur, where did you... where did you *go*? Earlier, when you stormed off for a bit?” Tubbo asks him carefully.

“I mean, Wilbur you came back sort of shaken up, covered in dirt...” Ranboo trails off, unable to stop himself from thinking on similar straits of him not remembering what he had done.

“I...” Wilbur stares at all of them. His dad, the kid he’d been talking down from a panic attack not an hour ago, a boy he’d only met a few weeks ago, his old best friend with every right to hate him, two of *her* closest friends beside her, a man who he had basically harassed recently over his relationship with Dream, some sword for hire who decided to have a heart, two far too helpful lovebirds who he barely remembers from the Manberg-Pogtopia days, and every single person is looking at him like he requires caution.

Wilbur snaps out of his social anxiety for a moment, “wait– wait what the fuck d’you mean– why the fuck would *I* be laying traps for *Dream*? Have you all lost it?”

Tubbo doesn’t falter and Wilbur almost feels betrayed that their kinship earlier seemingly means nothing. “Wilbur, I do not think you would work for Dream again *willingly*, but if Tommy’s on the line...” He hesitates. “No one would blame you.”

“And, well,” *Niki*, it’s *Niki* who speaks up next and it is not in his favor. “Explosives are sort of your m.o., Wilbur.”

“*Niki*, ” Wilbur is horrified that just maybe what they’re saying makes sense, even if it isn’t true. “How could you think I’d– that I’d do *that* to you?!” He nods to her now unbandaged leg, the range of burns treated with health potions already reveal what scars would remain. The scar where Ponk had had to cut away ruined remains and sew up what could be saved.

Niki looks at him with wry amusement. “Wil, you... you sort of already *have* done this to me before. I was just a bit luckier that time.”

Wilbur looks as if she’d slapped him across the face. He gets to his feet. Pauses for a moment, and manages to stammer out, “I’m sorry,” in Niki’s general direction before he pushes past the group and all but runs out of New L’Manberg.

~

Tommy wakes up to the feeling of that iron back on his wrist. Not only that, but a chain wrapping around his other wrist. The iron band is thicker and heavier now, he can’t even see the lodestone, it just barely pulls against his skin when he moves at all, a painful sort of itch at the slightest shift in his muscles, clearly having been welded on while he was dead, that meant when he healed in the revival, the iron could very well be actually attached to his skin. He can’t look up properly, the chains keeping him stooped over in a chair.

“H-Hello?” Tommy says hoarsely, struggling to look around the room. “...Dream?”

“Hi, Tommy.”

Tommy flinches at that voice behind him. Dream doesn't sound angry. Tommy knows that means nothing.

“Dream, I—” Tommy goes quiet with a whimper, Dream forcing him to look down until his chin is pressed to his chest.

“Don't move, Tommy,” Dream says; Tommy listens. “You know, it's my fault, really,” he sighs. “I didn't explain to you what happens if you try to take it off.”

“W-What h—”

“Shut the fuck up,” Dream's hand is squeezing tighter around the back of his neck now. “I highly suggest you don't move. Or breathe. You're good at that.”

Tommy has this sick, rising anxiety, alarms going off in his head, but he doesn't speak.

“See, Tommy. The alternative to keeping it tied around your wrist, was to... make a little incision.”

Tommy chokes on a scream as there's a sharp pain in his neck.

“Shhh,” Dream shushes him. “Let me finish explaining.” The pain doesn't get worse for now, so Tommy manages to bury his panicked breathing. “The *alternative*, was to put the lodestone right *here*.”

“*Don't!*” Tommy stammers on instinct, voice high and frantic as he feels Dream dig into whatever wound he had just made. He cries out as the pain gets worse.

“You don't get to fucking *decide* anymore, Tommy,” Dream says with gritted teeth. Now his fury radiates. “You tried to take it take off. So the lodestone is going to go right next to your spine, that way if you or anyone else try to *dig it out*,” he draws out another scream, “you end up paralyzed or dead. Isn't that clever of me?”

“D-Dream, please—”

“I said shut up! What, you can't hear me all of the sudden? You tried to disobey me once, and now it's a free for all?!” Dream shouts at him and Tommy wants nothing more than to be dead again. Dream digs deeper into his neck. Tommy can't even scream, a hoarse whine as his eyes stream with tears just from the pain never mind the terror. “Maybe I *should* fucking paralyze you for all the shit you've put me through.”

“*No!* Please— *Please*, Dream, I am so so sorry, please don't I didn't— I s-shouldn't have— *please!*” Tommy knows he's sobbing now, he knows he sounds weak, but he doesn't have a choice in that any more than he has a choice in the rest of it.

“What, you mean if I gave you another chance, you wouldn't try to break it?” Dream scoffs.

“Y-Yes! Yes, I w-wouldn't, I *swear*, I w-wouldn't—”

“Swear it on something important.”

Tommy just wants Dream to get whatever fucking knife or scalpel it is out of his fucking neck. Talking makes the pain radiate, the vibrations of his vocal chords are enough to make the pain sharper. “I s-swear it on Wilbur.”

“Hm.”

Tommy goes limp, not paralyzed, but consumed by relief as the pain dulls, the blade no longer digging in deeper.

“You don’t have any fucking *idea* how lucky you are, Tommy,” Dream circles him so Tommy can finally see him, crouching down to his eye level, a bloody scalpel in one hand, and no sign of the lodestone. “The lodestone is still there,” he taps Tommy’s wrist. “Just wanted to... demonstrate how important it is that you don’t *try to take it off*,” he says with weighted warning behind every word.

Tommy can’t bring himself to speak. And the thought of nodding right now sounds agonizing. He thinks Dream understands that he’s *definitely* listening.

Dream stands. “I’ll give you some time to think on it, clear your head.”

Tommy hears Dream’s footsteps out of his line of sight, followed by an iron door closing, and Tommy is left staring down at his own bound wrists, unable to move. The blood has dripped down his neck now, tickling his back, warmer than the cold sweat he’s drenched in. Tommy stares at the iron band around his wrist, and the ring welded onto it, perfectly suited to lock onto a chain. Tommy is nauseous and almost dizzy, but he cannot rest, just as he cannot look away from the visible reminder that he is nothing more than a dog on a leash.

~

Wilbur disappears and Tubbo moves to follow.

“Tubbo, you shouldn’t go out there, one life, remember?” Sapnap stops him before he can run after him.

“And do you really think Wilbur disappearing after we just accused him of working with Dream is going to lead anywhere *good*?” Tubbo snaps.

Sapnap falters, looking weary. “We don’t know for sure it’s him. I mean, I know we all want to think it’s Wilbur—”

“Er, we do?” Phil cuts in.

“Yeah. I mean, like Tubbo said it wouldn’t be his fault. It would be a lot easier if it was Wilbur, he’s not exactly strong, and him being forced into it is better than like... some unknown powerful traitor in our midst,” Ranboo points out.

“Or it could be Dream with an invis potion, like Punz said,” HBomb points out.

“I can go after him. He went the way we came on the prime path, so I know that route is clear,” Sam offers. “I’ll just ask him to come back.”

Ponk hesitates. “Be careful, Sammy. You get yourself blown up and I *will* kick your ass,” they give him a warning look.

Sam buries a laugh. “I’m in all Netherite. Don’t worry, I’m untouchable!”

Niki gives him a look. “Right. All Netherite. Untouchable,” she glances down at her leg.

Sam looks almost embarrassed at this, gives her an unsure nod, and heads back up the prime path.

Sam doesn’t really know Wilbur. So he doesn’t really know what to say when he catches up to the guy pacing and rambling and chewing on his fingernails with a vengeance on the bridge outside the community house.

“Uh, hey, Wilbur?” Sam starts.

Wilbur screams, flinching back, a hand over his heart. “Jesus fucking christ! I thought you weren’t an actual creeper– you can’t sneak up on a man like that!”

“Oh, sorry,” Sam tries to make himself smaller. He’d remembered how skittish Tommy had been whenever he had stood guard. “Look, the others kind of want you to come back, I mean, it’s not safe out here–”

“Oh, why would it be unsafe for *me* if I’m the one who fucking laid the traps apparently?!” Wilbur snarls.

Sam frowns. “I don’t have an opinion. I just... definitely don’t think it’s safe out here either way. I mean, I try not to leave Ponk alone, when I can avoid it.”

“And why did *you* come after me then?!” Wilbur is still looking for a fight.

“...because Ponk is with people. And I’ve cleared this part of the prime path for traps, so. I was okay to follow you,” Sam is cautious, analytical.

Wilbur is downright *twitchy*. “Okay, okay, I know some shit about *you*, Sam. You’ve worked for Dream, right? You build t-that– that fucking *prison* for him, which, j-just–” Wilbur shudders, “makes my fucking *skin crawl*, knowing the shit he’s put together on his own without Mr. *Redstone Engineer* helping him, so– you don’t think that’s fucking shady?!”

Sam looks startled. “Well, I mean, I built the prison before I knew... any of this. So. I wouldn’t have done it knowing what I know *now*.” Sam says it like he’s stating the obvious.

This still isn’t what Wilbur wants. Wilbur gets in Sam’s face, the man towering over him by a foot and *much* bulkier, but Wilbur is undeterred, pointing a finger literally in Sam’s direction. “You... *you* knew Dream from *way* back, didn’t you? A-And you took that job from him, a-and– And *you* know fucking redstone, yeah? There was fancy redstone shit in Dream’s first base and the like– a-and you all... *you*...” Wilbur is quickly running out of

fanatical steam. “And you... you...” Wilbur’s eyes are shining now, voice trembling. “You... you didn’t fucking protect him.” No one had explained thus far. Not really. How Tommy managed to slip through all of their fingertips.

Wilbur pushes against Sam, attempting to push him back, but Sam doesn’t move an inch. He doesn’t move toward Wilbur either, just looks slightly uncomfortable.

Wilbur brushes his eyes, staring directly at Sam’s chest like he can burn a hole in it. “P-Please—” he sniffs, clearing his throat in a feeble attempt to hide that he is very much crying. Wilbur isn’t whispering, but his voice is so small, almost childish in that quiet pleading, “please tell me you know where he is.”

Sam’s voice is different too, quieter, gentle. “I wish I did, Wilbur. I’m sorry.”

Wilbur nods shakily. He still hasn’t gotten what he wanted. Maybe it isn’t even for one of these strong bastards to be secretly working for the enemy, maybe he just wants one of them to snap and punch him and tell him he’s way out of line. No, no instead all they do is look at him like *that* and say *I’m sorry*.

Wilbur exhales a weak laugh, “you’re *sorry*. Heard that one before.” And with that, he turns around and heads back up the prime path toward New L’Manberg.

Sam decides then and there, regardless of the man’s insanity, there’s no way Wilbur is secretly working with Dream. He’ll be in the poor bastard’s corner, whatever debate is to come.

Chapter End Notes

hiii. sorryyyy!

thanks for reading <3

Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

CW: injuries, threats of violence, suicidal thoughts, god complexes, maybe dehumanization? eh. you'll see

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Punz had liked Niki. It had been easier to think of all these people as something small, something he would soon outgrow. That became harder when it got personal, when it targeted someone Punz had never had a problem with. Niki is still alive. She still has three lives. And she has been forever changed by what Punz had done.

Punz decides the tension found in that bunker under the ocean would surely be better than having to walk around the server and force himself not to shout at someone to *stop fucking moving are you blind did you not see you just barely missed a fucking tripwire?!*

Instead of breaking the traps, instead of warning anyone, he messages Dream.

You whisper to Dream: stasis

And he's given a new sort of unease, ears popping as he teleports from the surface to deep under water.

"Hey!" Dream says cheerfully. "How's it going on the Mainlands? Someone get blown up yet?"

Punz frowns, irritated. "Yeah."

"Really?" Dream seems pleasantly surprised. "Who?"

Punz feels rage bubble in his chest. He buries it. "Niki."

Dream laughs, delighted. "Oh, that's *perfect!* Wilbur must've *loved* that."

Punz scowls. "Meaning?"

"Niki— He's *so* weak when it comes to her. He was basically volunteering to get blown up by Schlatt for her— don't you remember?" Dream says. "Oh, and Tommy is gonna lose it, too, she was one of *the* L'Manbergians," Dream is almost giddy. "We should tell him— come on."

Punz follows Dream gloomily. He wants to tell Dream he should just tell him himself, that really he should be getting back to the Mainlands, but he just got here. Punz can't stand being there or here. He misses his isolation. Punz is shaken from his wandering thoughts of

self pity by the sight of Tommy, bloody and seemingly unconscious, hunched over in a chair, blood dried to his neck and beading up around his wrists from the chains there.

“What the fuck?!” Punz stops in his tracks.

“Oh! Yeah, Tommy tried to break off the lodestone,” Dream offers by way of explanation. Dream goes to untie him, Tommy flinches on his approach and Punz is all the more inclined to just leave by means of the fact that Tommy is actually conscious and just too weak to move. The tension lets up and Tommy immediately collapses. He doesn’t try to get up, remains lying on his side on the ground. Not that Punz blames him. Tommy is in for a lot more hurt when he stands up next if he’s been stuck like that long enough for the blood to dry.

“Tommy? Come on, you with us?” Dream slaps Tommy’s cheek none too gently.

Tommy only responds by curling into a ball.

“We’ve got news, Tommy! Don’t you care about how all your little friends are doing?” Dream says teasingly.

Tommy becomes aware of Punz’s presence and Punz really wishes he weren’t. He looks at Punz, not with anger nor pleading. He just looks tired.

“Punz?” Dream looks at him, gesturing to Tommy. “Why don’t you fill him in?”

Punz feels sick. “Why don’t you explain? It was your idea.”

“Fine, fine,” Dream bounces back on his heels. “So, Tommy, I’m sure you remember back in the day, I told you, I was gonna punish you for that first escape attempt, and I still haven’t.”

Tommy is responsive enough to glance in Dream’s general direction with blatant, weary fear.

“Don’t you worry, Tommy. You’re not gonna get hurt, and it’s already started!” Dream says cheerfully. “I told you, I was going to hurt your little friends, maybe dabble in destroying L’Manberg, and my good friend Punz here has been planting tnt all over the server, isn’t that right, Punz?” Now Dream looks at him with expectation.

“Yes,” Punz says rigidly.

“And could you tell him what you told me? I’m actually curious about the specifics,” Dream asks, but Punz knows it’s not a request.

Punz doesn’t look at Tommy, even as he knows the kid is staring at him.

“One of the traps. I put it outside of Tommy’s old house,” *I didn’t think anyone would fucking go over there. No one has wanted to so far. Why the fuck would they?* Punz acts as if he’s only talking to Dream, like Tommy isn’t his captive audience. “And...” Punz is irritated that he feels guilty. He can’t pretend that’s not what it was, that ache in his chest. “And Niki triggered it.”

“Did she die?” Tommy’s response is immediate. Punz had almost been under the impression that at present he *couldn’t* talk, and while still hoarse and weak, Tommy asks without hesitation.

“No.”

Dream looks back up at him. “Really? What happened, then?”

Punz doesn’t want to fucking say this. Dream isn’t entitled to her pain to use to gloat and there’s no reason Tommy should hear this.

“She got hurt. She survived it, though. And... and everyone is looking after her,” Punz knows he sounds too kind. “So, I’m thinking they’ll take a pause looking for Tommy.” That feels balanced enough.

“Hurt? Hurt how bad?” Tommy is the one who asks the question Punz didn’t want to hear.

What’s Punz meant to do, lie to him? “She’s—” Punz stops. He sounds too pained. He needs to be colder. “She’s missing part of her leg.”

“How much?” Dream asks.

Punz wants to throw something. He just draws a line across his right leg, midway down his own calf.

Tommy has stopped responding. He sees Punz do this and curls back into a ball, tugging at his own hair, arms covering his face.

“Nice job, Punz. That’s a strong start. Next time, can you set one by the community house? I wanna put it in a spot that gets more traffic. I mean, doing it by Tommy’s house was a nice touch. Bet Niki was helping look for you, right, Tommy?” Dream musses up Tommy’s hair, not caring when he flinches, before getting to his feet. “We’ll leave you alone for a bit, Tommy. Hey, you might want to feed your little pets, y’know?”

“W-What?” Tommy says hoarsely, voice still muffled behind his hands.

“Yeah. They haven’t been fed in... what, at least a couple days?” Dream shrugs. “Your responsibility, remember?”

“I-I’ve been... I’ve been dead or getting fucking tortured, h-how was I supposed to— When was I—” Tommy is openly distraught again.

“Maybe when you wasted hours trying to break off the lodestone, hm?” Dream says, calm and pointed. And with that, he leaves him.

For a brief moment, Punz and Tommy are alone, and somehow it’s worse that Tommy doesn’t look at him with hatred, rather something more like hurt, like somehow Punz, despite their current allegiances, had betrayed his trust.

Punz is quick to leave him.

He follows Dream toward his library.

“So, have you done *anything* with the revivebook, then?” Punz asks irritably.

“Today? No, not today, I had to deal with that whole situation first,” Dream shrugs.

“What *situation*? Who cares if Tommy tried to break the lodestone— he can’t leave here. You don’t need to be able to *find* him to test the book. *And* we have the stasis chamber setup! There is no logical reason for you to spend time and effort making a way that you always know where Tommy is. You do realize how pointless that is, right?” Punz snaps.

“*I’m* sorry if I’m ensuring I don’t repeat past mistakes! Maybe it’s not such a sore subject to you, but last time I lost Tommy, I lost *two of my lives*, so you don’t have the fucking right to question what I do to prevent that!” Dream doesn’t even sound angry, just annoyed, like a child making excuses for wasting time.

Punz stops, scowling. “Fine. What next, then?”

Dream sighs, still grumpy. “We could test the paralysis thing again. If you really wanna work with the revive book.”

Punz pauses. He doesn’t know how to reply. He wants to resume experiments, if he pushes Dream to figure out immortality or at *least* share more of the revivebook with him, that is important, but this is all making him far more uneasy. He waits too long.

“You’re not getting cold feet on me, are you, Punz?” Dream says coolly.

“What do you mean? I’ve done all the shit you’ve wanted, just because I don’t have *fun* hurting people doesn’t mean I’m not doing my job,” Punz’s defense is immediate and sharp. He knew this was coming. “When are you gonna start doing yours?”

Dream turns to face him sharply. “What do you mean by that, Punz?” He says, now irritatingly calm.

Punz doesn’t flinch. “You said we’re here to figure out immortality. Not running around, playing god like a kid frying an anthill.”

Dream doesn’t move, his expression is unreadable of course, but still, something changes, the slightest shift in posture or tone and it’s enough to set Punz on edge. “*Playing* god?” Dream asks.

“Yeah, Dream. I know what you want, what you *think* you are,” Punz hisses. He knows this is a dangerous game. He doesn’t care. “But if you *really* want to be a god, why don’t you figure out *not dying*, like you said you would.”

Dream exhales a laugh. He takes a step forward. “I’m not too stressed about not dying, Punz. Not immediately, anyway. You’re right. Being immortal is important, but the details...” He sighs. Another step closer. Punz refuses to take a step back. “I mean, *I’m* not gonna die. Who’s gonna kill me, huh? *You*? You *can’t* fucking kill me! And neither can anyone else!” He spreads his arms out, gesturing grandly to himself. “No one can kill me!

I'm not immortal, Punz, sure. I'll give you that. Maybe I'm... better," Punz can hear the smug grin in his tone, "I *am* immortality. So, until I figure out how to make myself immortal, it doesn't fucking matter because *I cannot die*."

Punz doesn't say anything. He'd once considered Dream a friend. Even in his more vicious states, he could have at least seen Dream as someone worth his respect. He had always been driven. Punz admired that. He wouldn't say that is entirely gone, if kidnapping Tommy hadn't made him reconsider, it's clear it takes a lot more to get Punz to back down, and it's not that Punz is reconsidering their partnership, but his annoyance just keeps growing louder and he's beginning to realize, properly, truly, he doesn't *like* Dream anymore.

"Coming out here was a waste of time," Punz says, tone flat and unfeeling. "I'll go set up some more traps. Let me know if you find anything actually useful."

Dream doesn't question him or quip back, just asks, "if it starts raining, will you let me know?"

Punz's first impulse is to ask why. He doesn't. He wants to leave it alone, to not know more things to be uneasy about. So he just nods and heads to the trap door.

Punz has just gotten here. The journey back to the mainlands is horribly long. And when he gets there, he'll be expected to set more traps. Still, he doesn't want to stay here. Surely the irritations of the Mainlands are better than being here to watch whatever Dream has planned for Tommy.

Why's that, Punz? Are you a fucking coward? You don't mind helping until, what, you decide it's too much? You're pathetic.

You'll leave Tommy alone to deal with Dream, because you're too squeamish to watch it happen.

What, like staying would bring Tommy some comfort? You hold his hand while Dream puts a knife in his back until he can't even feel you're there?

Punz reaches the surface and feels a pang of worry he doesn't want to name or understand. It's raining.

~

Tommy is still exhausted and dizzy. He wouldn't mind staying curled on the floor forever, but Dream has kindly told him he's got two hungry chickens to take care of. First he just tries to stretch out his legs, still laying on the ground. The pain is acute, but not blinding. He sits up. His back cracks but it doesn't make the pain ease up as it straightens for the first time in hours.

"F-Fuck..." Tommy whines. "Oh... Okay... y-you gotta get up, King. You gotta stand." Tommy rests his right hand, visibly shaking, on the chair, intending to use it to pull himself up. Already that's a challenge. "Maybe I should just... just fuckin' crawl..."

Tommy takes a few deep breaths. His wrists are fucking itchy now. Pain he almost finds more tolerable than when the dried blood and the scabs get *itchy*. Tommy drags himself to his feet before he can reconsider, even if he immediately regrets it, legs weak from being bent so long, that old injury on his left leg is especially willing to make itself known as his knees go weak and he falls back into the chair for a moment.

Tommy is quick to stand again. He doesn't want to spend any more time fucking sitting there.

He makes it to the long corridor on wobbly legs, his hand pressed to the wall to keep standing and his posture still hunched. He sees the two iron doors, he smells that tiny hint of soil and plant life that makes his chest ache for the outdoors, and at the back of the room, Linda and Berta pace their mossy pen but give no sign of distress. Tommy hobbles a bit faster now, going to the barrel just outside the pen, grabbing fistfuls of seed and throwing it into the pen with something almost frenzied.

The two chickens take to it like they'd been starving, but in Tommy's experience chickens always eat like they're starving. The ladies preoccupied, Tommy doesn't have to rush through the gate, instead each step still labored and painful as he slides to the mossy ground inside.

Tommy's neck still hurts. The blood has dried, but it was a deep wound that doesn't just sting at the skin, but it *aches*, deeply and heavily and horribly close to his spine.

He'll do it. You know he will. He'll cut you open and fucking chip you and you can be damn fucking sure he won't make sure you're unconscious or dead for the process. Tommy stares down at the iron band that he knows contains the lodestone. *One day. One day when you win and get out of here, when you know Tubbo and them can keep you safe, you'll find a way to take it off.*

Tommy's vision of *one day* still involves needing someone to protect him, because, conscious or not, Tommy is beginning to fall prey to the same thought Dream had been preaching himself– Dream cannot die. So Tommy can only hope for a day where Dream is at least true to his word, and maybe then he can take off something that is only slightly less horrible than a brand on his skin.

Until then, it's part of you now. Really, part of you more than your left fucking index finger, yeah? Better to just get used to it.

Tommy curls his hands into fists, eyes shut tightly, biting back tears, and resists the urge to try and move the band in some way. The slightly itching burn of skin rubbed raw underneath the iron, he'll just have to get used to that feeling too. It can't be all that different to getting used to his bad leg bothering him, or missing a finger.

Maybe if he stops messing with it, his skin will heal. It should fit well enough that it won't rub against his skin if he doesn't mess with it. Fuck, he keeps on thinking about the dent in the side he made. Dream added another layer of iron, but he didn't fix what came underneath, so he'll have to get used to that too. Irritating and pinching like wearing shoes a size too small. He can get used to that.

Tommy flinches like he's been shocked when something brushes against him. He opens his eyes to one of the chickens determinedly nudging his fist, trying to get him to uncurl it like he might have more seeds there.

"Ma'am, you can't be doing that, I got nothing, see?" Tommy uncurls his fist and that in itself forces some of the tension from his shoulders. "Aw, fuck, I can't've forgotten which— Er, hm," he eyes the chicken carefully. "Yeah. Black spot on your beak— that was, that was Linda, yeah? One sec, Linda, let me..." Tommy pulls himself back to his feet by holding onto the fence. He goes to toss more seed on the ground, but he pauses, sitting back on the ground and offering the chicken his palm, flat in front of her. She is quick to accept, her beak causing the occasional sharp pinch on his hand, but it's more than worth it.

This is the first moment of actual, excited joy Tommy has felt in... he doesn't know how long.

"Ohhh!" Tommy coos. "You like me now, then? This is fuckin' great, oh, thank you!" He feels almost giddy, leaning forward, offering his hand toward Berta, but she is still reluctant. "Ah, that's alright, fair enough. I get nervous when people reach out toward me too. Especially to offer food— like, the fuck is that about? *Always* a catch, eh? How're you supposed to know they're not gonna grab ya?" He scatters more seed on the ground, tossing it away from him so Berta will be able to eat comfortably.

Tommy is in pain, moving hurts, but he hears the iron door open and scrambles over the fence, anything to get the biggest target in the room— *him*— away from the chickens.

Tommy stops, halfway down the row of plants, staring at Dream, unwilling to get closer.

"Where's... where's Punz?"

"Gone. Why do you care?" Dream scoffs.

Tommy shrugs. Despite his best efforts to remind himself that Punz is also the enemy, part of him wishes he would stay.

"Don't look so *nervous*, Tommy. I've been working on something. I think it'll be fun," Dream says.

Tommy scowls. "I think yours and my idea of fun are very different."

"Aw, no, really!" Dream pouts. "You're gonna love this— you get to go outside!"

Tommy stares at him. Nothing says that Dream is lying to him.

"I mean, I've got to kill you to get you up there first, of course, you know the rules. Only one water breathing potion. So," Dream steps forward.

Tommy takes one more step back.

Dream stops, sighing irritably. "Come *on*, Tommy," he stomps his foot like an impatient child. "Just let me break your neck! There are a lot worse ways we could do this, you

know.”

Tommy forces himself to stand still, shutting his eyes tightly, prickles of dread almost painful in his stomach as he waits. It’s like Dream said, there are worse ways. At least this is quick. Tommy just barely has time to flinch at Dream’s hands on his neck before he returns to the black.

~

Wilbur is outvoted.

Sam, Punz, and HBomb are his only defenders. The others mostly abstain, and those that don’t, well. Some hurt worse than others. Like Niki, and Tubbo, and Phil takes him by surprise if only because of how delicately he’s been treating him since he came back. The general consensus does its best not to be cruel, their thought being *“well, we’re not totally sure you’re planting bombs on the server, and if you were, we’d totally forgive you because your little brother is a hostage, but just to be safe you’re going to have a guard 24/7.”*

They don’t let him smoke.

Not a flat out no, but he can’t seem to find his old stashes with people always around him, they fiercely discourage it, and definitely don’t let him do it inside. Wilbur finds it incredibly annoying and also a bit funny. Dream gave him something that the people he loves refuse to. If that isn’t a sign to quit smoking he doesn’t know what is.

Wilbur is hyper aware of his circumstances. His guard is always someone who could physically overpower him. It’s not a guard meant to fight off Dream, it’s not the ones who had once bested that bastard in combat or at least held their own, it’s always someone just below that level of skill. Ranboo, Tubbo, at one point Eret, Sam maybe out of guilt that he couldn’t convince the others. They all act like this isn’t against *him*, even the general energy that their goal is to protect him. Wilbur knows better.

At first Wilbur thinks they’re also doing their best not to tell him anything, and at first he’s annoyed, because how the fuck do they expect him to contact Dream? He loses his new comm half the time and he’s almost never alone. And instead he comes to realize it’s worse. It’s not that they’re keeping things from him, it’s that there is *nothing* to tell. No progress, no sightings, at least no one has gotten blown up. There was one other mine in the community house, but the water smothered the tnt and Quackity got away with burns no worse than standing too close to a campfire, shaken but fundamentally unharmed.

And sadly this fact did not exonerate him, as it went off *before* they put him under 24 hour guard.

The other side effect of the bombs being they had lost the majority of their volunteers to go looking for Tommy. Half the server was scared to leave their homes, understandably, but it did make everything feel a bit worse, a bit harder. No one was finding anything because *no one is fucking looking*.

Those who would be more inclined to search to the ends of the earth for Tommy, one is a weak half dead lunatic who can't be trusted, the other is a boy on one life.

Not to say everyone has given up. Sappnap still takes his duties with a seriousness Wilbur can't help but grudgingly respect. Eret hasn't stopped either, and their insistence they justified to Wilbur in such a way that left him understanding if not unnerved:

"If you think about it, one of my lives belongs to you. And to Tommy, and you, Tubbo, and Fundy. You lost your first lives in my trap, so I owe you at least one of mine, yeah?" Eret had said.

Wilbur had only nodded in reply, but at the same time he realized that he no longer resented them for it, in fact, he rather liked the person Eret had become all his years away dead.

Tubbo being also confined to the safety of the New L'Manberg platforms means they spend a stressfully large amount of time together.

Wilbur almost doesn't mind it. He is still so sure that he and Tubbo have an understanding that the others seem incapable of.

He and Tubbo sit across from one another, looking out the windows of Phil's house at the dark and hazy New L'Manberg.

It's raining.

"How much longer, d'you think?" Wilbur mumbles, resting his chin on his propped up arm

"Uh... How much longer do I think what?" Tubbo asks.

Wilbur doesn't look at him, just at the rain. "Until I kill myself." He only glances over after several seconds pass without reply.

Tubbo stares at him, gaze piercing enough that Wilbur sits up straight.

"W-What?" Wilbur laughs nervously, before quickly realizing *laughing* probably wasn't the appropriate response.

But then Tubbo laughs too, a little more bitterly, but still. "Nothing, nothing. I just thought..." He looks down at the dining table like he wants to dissect it. "Well, I had a moment of *when did you start thinking that last time?*" Another dry laugh half under his breath. "Like, did it happen right when you and Tommy got to Pogtopia, or did it take a few weeks to set in?"

"Oh." That's all Wilbur has. What else can he say to that?

"But it's a fair enough question," Tubbo continues mildly. "When we kill you, it'll be with the assumption that Tommy has figured out his own location, made it to your Limbo, or Ghostbur's Limbo, rather, and passed along the message within the past days, when he's—well. We know he's probably a bit— a bit preoccupied right now," for a moment, a *second*,

Tubbo seems vulnerable, a tiny tremor in his voice, and then it's gone. "That's a lot of assumptions, Wilbur."

"Yeah, yeah it is," Wilbur replies more reluctantly now. There was a strange mixture of relief and unease at Tubbo saying *when we kill you* with such calm certainty.

"So," Tubbo leans back in his chair, looking out the window. "Not yet."

Wilbur stares at him, but Tubbo doesn't look his way again. The conversation is clearly over, and while little was said, Wilbur can't help but feel like he just lost an argument.

~

"*Wake up.*"

Tommy returns to life under a warm rain, the humidity thick in the air. He's surrounded by noise, birds, other parts of the general hum of the jungle, he blearily looks up at the towering trees, flinching when he sees that white mask staring down at him.

"Welcome back! And you're *outside*," Dream is too excited for comfort, his axe is at the ready.

"W-Why?" Is the first word Tommy can manage.

"Okay, okay, so," Dream paces, "I thought about what you said, and like, you have *no chance* of getting out of the base under water, like, actually. Which is part of why I agreed to the deal, but that's so *boring*. So, I thought, when it's raining out, so, y'know, Endermen aren't a problem because getting help is *so* unfair, I see how far you can get!" Dream stops, turning to look at him, gesturing grandly to the jungle like he'd just given Tommy the gift of a lifetime.

Tommy struggles to sit up, his neck sore. "I don't... I don't understand."

"What don't you *understand*? Why are you always so dumb?" Dream huffs. "*You* run. I try to catch you."

Now Tommy is alert, spooked, but *almost* optimistic. "A-And if I get away—"

"Well, if I really can't find you, I obviously go back and use the stasis," Dream shrugs. "But I mean, if you manage to find someone and ask for help, that gets them one step closer to actually finding you, right?"

Tommy's momentary hope crumbles. "So, I run. And if I *do* get away from you, you still get to take me back? I thought the deal was if I escaped—"

"Well, clearly you haven't escaped if I can just get you back," Dream says irritably. "Look, I don't see what your problem is. This is definitely in your favor. You get to go outside, I am *literally letting you run and look for help*, and you're *still* finding a reason to complain?"

“I j-just—” Tommy doesn’t know how to take this. If he should take it as a chance or just another cruel game. Maybe it is really both. “I dunno if I should run. I dunno if you’re tricking me. I mean, you *want* me to stay, right?”

“Not right *now*,” Dream whines. “Okay, okay, fine. I’ll incentivize you a bit more,” he swings his axe at his side like it’s a toy and not an incredibly dangerous blade. “If I have to use the stasis pearl, that means you win! Rest of the day off, I’ll let you get food, I’ll leave you alone. How’s that?”

Tommy brushes the rain out of his eyes. The jungle is hot and humid, but Tommy is very skinny and soaked to the skin, so he is a bit shivery. This sounds *good*. That is incredibly dangerous, far more dangerous than an axe. “What about the compass?”

There. That’s it. Dream is letting him do this because he knows there’s no way he can win.

“Nah, that would’ve been *boring*. It’s in my enderchest. So, like, if I needed it I could get it, but not for the game,” Dream bounces back on his heels, all eager energy.

Okay. Tommy doesn’t think Dream is lying. Not that it matters much if he were. Dream is clearly impatient and he’s probably not going to just let Tommy say he doesn’t feel like playing.

“O-Okay,” Tommy staggers to his feet. He’s still barefoot, which sucks. He’s definitely going to shred his feet on the jungle floor. “How does this go, then?”

“I will give you a one minute head start. Just because you’ve never seen the area before, that feels fair,” Dream says. “One, two, three, four—”

“O-Oh so we’re *going going*, like, right now?” Tommy stammers out, eyes wide, his heart is already beating faster.

“—eight, nine, ten, eleven—”

“Okay, okay,” Tommy looks around wildly, for anything like an easier path, but it’s all just more of the same.

“—thirteen, fourteen, fifteen—”

Tommy turns directly away from Dream. He starts running, stumbling over thick roots and tangled vines hanging from the trees, rain dripping into his eyes and big, wet leaves the size of his head smacking him in the face. His whole body protests the sudden activity after days confined, his bad leg punishing him fiercely for daring to put weight on it, but he doesn’t stop.

Finally it hits him exactly why this is not an unnervingly good offer from Dream, what about this particularly makes Tommy feel like something is *wrong*. The countdown must have ended, because Dream shouts:

“*OH, TOMMY!*”

And Tommy is gripped by the sharp, primal terror he had grown familiar with before his recapture— Dream is hunting him again.

Chapter End Notes

the most dangerous game~~~

I've literally had this idea since I thought of the stasis chamber trap. And I am so aware of how unhinged this all is, and I know there is like 0 lull, because I don't want this fic to end up as long as tddd and I Still have plans to get to lmao. So. This train isn't stopping. Full speed ahead into a brick wall. I guess.

Anyway. As always, thank you for reading! I love seeing all your thoughts, glad you horror fans are still hanging in there lmao.

Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

CW: graphic depictions of violence, description of injuries, animal death. It isn't pretty.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tommy is so fucking tired. His legs ache and burn and he's drenched in sweat and rain and just the thick, humid condensation that makes *breathing* hard, but he hasn't heard Dream behind him for maybe ten minutes so he allows himself to stop and collapse up under the foliage and take a moment to try to catch his breath. He quickly brushes the rain from his eyes, breathing hard. He whines between gasps for air as he stares at his bare feet. They're filthy, wet earth and leaves covering them but that doesn't hide the sting or the bits of blood smeared among the leaves. Tommy sees an especially large splinter and considers taking it out, his hands shake too bad when he even tries to get close, and curling up that much is agonizing. He gives up, covering his mouth to quiet his breathing, listening closely, but there's nothing.

Tommy leans back against a tree, looking up, opening his mouth to catch some of the rainwater. He's still so fucking warm, which is annoying considering how cold he'd been under water. Why can't there just be a place with a *reasonable temperature*? Still, the water helps, however hard it is to get enough to drink just by staring up.

Okay. He almost wants to just stay here. Maybe Dream will run past him.

"*Oh, Tommy! Where are you? I lost you!*" Somewhere, somewhere distant but too close for comfort, Dream's elated shouting makes him flinch. Tommy doesn't know why Dream keeps announcing his own location. He can't be that confident in his abilities. All this is giving Tommy a warning of where he is. Tommy stays low, pressed into the ground, the mud swelling around him, unmoving except for the rapid rise and fall of his chest, listening.

Nothing.

Tommy slowly sits up, scanning the shadowy trees for that white mask. He doesn't stand up all the way, he keeps low to the ground, running in the opposite direction of where he had heard Dream's shouts.

He can hide. He can't maintain this, running nonstop, so he continues in short bursts, taking a few minutes to put some more distance between him and Dream and then finding a place low to the ground to hide. The mud is actually cooling him down a bit. Holy *shit* had he missed mud...

Tommy had been prepared to never go outside again, and he isn't sure if the state he is now in should call for relief, but he likes the feeling of the rain, the mud caking his skin and even

soothing his scrapes. He knows he'll be miserable and itchy especially when it dries, but for now it's almost soothing.

"*Tommy! Come on, am I close? Where are you?*" Dream shouts. This is the most fucking deranged game of hide and seek, it seems. Dream is still having a frankly terrifying amount of fun.

Tommy stops sprinting, scrambling into a narrow, muddy channel between two roots of the dense jungle trees. Tommy has a feeling Dream is cheating. He must be checking the compass occasionally, just enough to give him a direction.

Dickhead.

Tommy stares down at his mud drenched body and has a different, gloomier realization. Dream doesn't need the compass right now. Tommy is *definitely* leaving footprints.

Tommy listens.

And from just behind him, he hears Dream's voice, "*Oh, Tommy! Come on where are you!*"

Tommy is too terrified to realize that voice is a bit higher, a bit more warbled. He screams, jolting to his feet, hitting his head against the branch above him on his way out. He takes off running and out of the corner of his eye he sees Dream's white mask turn toward him a half dozen meters away.

What the fuck—

Tommy doesn't have time to look back, that primal drive telling him to *run* screams louder until Tommy is without conscious thought, only a drive to *keep moving*.

Tommy barely stumbles when a crossbow bolt pierces his shoulder, the force of it throws him forward, but he catches himself on a branch before he loses his footing and keeps going, the hot blood mixing with the rain and his sweat and if his footprints weren't leaving a trail before, this *definitely* will.

Tommy weaves through the trees, he can't even try to stop the blood flow with his other hand as his uninjured arm is struggling to keep himself from getting blinded by leaves.

"*Oh, Tommy!*" Dream's voice echoes from somewhere to his right and Tommy has no fucking idea how he caught up so fast, so with a panicked jolt in his steps he turns left sharply, throwing himself down a steep incline, catching himself so he doesn't break his neck, but the pain shudders up his arms and his palms are scraped bloody and raw against the damp bark of the trees, his knees ache even if their landing was softened by the mud.

Tommy isn't sure if Dream is still following until the man helpfully tells him by sending another crossbow bolt his way, it grazes his knee as he's trying to climb over some of the taller roots. Tommy yelps as his bare feet slip in the mud and he faceplants, a thick root nailing him in the chest and knocking the wind out of him. He tries to get back up and directly in front of him he hears Dream's voice—

“Where are you?”

Tommy cowers, covering his head, but *it doesn't make fucking sense*, because Dream is *definitely* behind him. Tommy looks up and two little black eyes stare back at him, red feathers slicked down by rain water.

“Y-You’ve got to be fucking joking,” Tommy says hoarsely. He struggles to his feet and just before he can bolt again, Tommy feels something nail him in the back, right on his spine, sending him to the ground.

Tommy gasps for breath, lungs almost rattled as he wheezes, struggling to look up as Dream steps around him. Tommy isn’t focused on him, he’s focused on the stupid fucking bird that screwed him over, but it doesn’t say it again. Parrots mimicked *mobs*. They mimicked zombies and the like, a warning of danger.

Maybe the bird is smarter than you think.

“That wasn’t a bad run, Tommy!” Dream says cheerfully. “You made it a couple hours, actually. A lot better than I thought you’d do.”

Tommy struggles to pull himself off the ground, but before he gets the chance, Dream’s boot is back between his shoulder blades, sending him back to the mud with a wheezing gasp. “O-Okay, you won. You won.” Tommy has to turn his neck painfully to keep from literally drowning in mud, but Dream does not ease up.

“Not yet, I mean. *No consequences*, remember? Even when you hunt for sport, you don’t *catch and release*, Tommy.” Dream leans down closer, putting more weight on Tommy’s spine until he thinks he might black out. “You *kill* what you catch and bring home the trophy!” Dream puts his crossbow back over his shoulder.

“O-Okay,” Tommy goes limp. It’s easier to sink into the mud than struggle against Dream crushing him. Dream doesn’t get his axe back out, in fact, he eases up, stepping off of Tommy, circling so he stood across from where Tommy had turned to try and avoid drowning. Tommy hopes Dream will just snap his neck, but he’s uneasy. “W-What’re you—”

Before Tommy can finish, Dream stomps down on Tommy’s neck. It should’ve been a clean kill, but the mud, the ground is too soft and instead of his spine snapping easily crushed between two surfaces, it just cracks, and Tommy feels like his head is going to explode, pressure building from the top of his spine, shooting up into his skull. He has just enough awareness to be horrified by hearing his own vertebrae *crunch* before the pain is too blinding. He survives for a few more seconds before whatever half-assed damage Dream had inflicted is finally enough to break something vital.

~

Punz stays in the Mainlands for a few days.

He refuses to let himself think about Tommy or Dream, and Dream doesn’t reach out. Punz decided to go with Dream’s idea of furthering his hero image. He stops Sapnap from getting

his face blown off just in time, pretending to spot a tripwire in the light, even as he'd watched Sapnap amble carelessly toward it. These people are so fucking stupid, why don't they just *watch where they're going*? Regardless, Sapnap had been grateful. Punz knows he can't do that all the time or it will definitely get suspicious, but a few times can't hurt.

Punz starts to get nervous. The radio silence from Dream— it's not like he thinks Tommy has somehow found a way to overpower him and is now waiting in the bunker to jump him the moment Punz asks to be sent back, but too much quiet is a dangerous thing.

Anything could be happening to Tommy in that time.

No. No, that part doesn't matter. Dream isn't making progress. That's what matters.

So eventually, four or five days of wandering around on a wild goose chase with a bunch of grieving, terrified little fools, he goes back.

You whisper to Dream: I think I have an idea.

Dream doesn't respond immediately and Punz pretends that doesn't make him overthink what could be keeping Dream so busy, but eventually he replies.

Dream whispers to you: oh? Do you?

You whisper to Dream: have you ever tried reviving Tommy while he's still alive?

Dream whispers to you: you're not making sense.

You whisper to Dream: stasis me back, then

Dream whispers to you: give me like a half hour. Im not at the base right now

Punz frowns, uneasy. He types out ***Where are you then?*** before deleting it.

You whisper to Dream: ok

~

Tommy doesn't know if he should hate the bouts of rain lately or not. It's only been a few days, but Dream had killed him, dragged him back to the base, patched him back together, and Tommy feels like he'd barely collapsed onto his bed when Dream would wake him with a killing blow and then wake him *again* in some patch of jungle. He gets to go outside. He can't pretend that doesn't feel like a relief, but *fuck* this is exhausting.

Tommy has no stamina. He's sickly and underfed and exhausted and Dream is fighting fit and far too excited for this game of theirs. It's not fucking *fair*.

Tommy takes a little bit of vicious pride in the fact that he's managed to run for at least an hour each time thus far.

Which makes today's loss all the more embarrassing.

Tommy is light on his feet, running as fast as he can manage but with a bit more caution now. It's better to be a bit slower than risk cutting his feet open, that slows him down far more.

The parrots are almost like ghosts. They haunt him, even when he's away from Dream, sometimes one of them will just copy his taunts. It makes sense. Dream is proudly making himself the loudest thing out here and the parrots take to it naturally.

So Tommy flinches away from a croaking imitation of "*found you!*" and keeps running. He pauses for a moment. He should keep going, Dream is still too close behind him for him to hunker down and rest, but on the side of the tree are a few pods of cocoa beans.

Tommy does something impulsive and pathetic. He stops and breaks open the pod, eating raw cocoa beans with desperate speed. It's not the same, in any sense of the word, but Tommy missed the hot cocoa Ranboo would make for him and Tubbo. He missed it a lot. So he couldn't bring himself to pass it up, deluded as it may be. He starts running again, but by then it's already too late. He'd lost whatever headstart he'd had this time around and gets tangled in one of the vines and before he can pull free, there is blinding pain in his right shoulder.

Dream didn't use the crossbow this time. And he didn't *just* use his axe. He fucking *threw the axe at him*.

Tommy hits the ground and for a few seconds he does try struggling, but he dimly glances over and sees that his arm is almost entirely unattached. It doesn't hurt. He takes that as a warning and stops moving, save for a feeble cry when Dream yanks the axe back out.

"Aw, that was a close call. Thought I was gonna take your arm off! Whew. Lucky shot," Dream says brightly and Tommy can't quite tell if he wanted Tommy to lose his arm or not. "Don't worry, I'm sure it'll heal. If you want, like, I'm pretty sure it fixes the fatal injuries guaranteed, and the arm is still a *little* attached," Dream pokes at the bit of tissue still binding the limb to Tommy and even that doesn't hurt, much to Tommy's vaguely dulled worry, "so if we just hang out for a bit, you'll probably bleed out soon and then it'll *have* to heal your arm back on properly, right?" He laughs. "Yeah, I don't know, guess we'll see, right?"

Dream sits on a felled log across from him, watching him die with mild interest.

Tommy knows he's bleeding out, but it's strange that it's like he can feel his own pulse in the wound. His vision is blurry from the rain, but he can actually see the way the blood bursts from his arm is in time to his heartbeat. Tommy tries to move his right arm. Nothing happens. Which also makes sense considering he can see bone and tissue quite clearly through the blood mixing with the rain.

This might be the fastest he's bled out since Techno's house, and soon he returns to the dark.

His first coherent thought upon arriving in Limbo is he'd almost lost his arm over some fucking cocoa beans. Tommy has been hunted down five times in the last five days. The first day just once, the second the rain eased up, the third he was hunted *thrice*, Dream stopping him with a crossbow bolt through his leg, healing him, and telling an exhausted and

miserable Tommy to start running again, *that* had been a bad one. Dream had even pointed in a direction and told him “*Y’know, L’Manberg is a few thousand blocks that way.*” He’d heard Dream’s fucking voice too close behind him— and he still isn’t totally sure if it actually was his voice or not— and had kept running well past what he should’ve been capable of. He was already exhausted from the first go of things, but he kept going regardless of the damage it could cause, pushing himself so hard he made himself throw up and that had definitely not helped with the dehydration and starvation so that time Dream didn’t even have to shoot him. He’d just collapsed. Dream had rewarded him with a kick to his spine, telling him, “*that’s another round I’ve won! Come on. Get up.*” Somehow he’d expected Tommy to keep running.

Tommy hadn’t moved from the ground no matter how many times Dream kicked him and eventually Dream gave up, muttering about how “*fine, next time I guess I’ll just bring a gapple or something to keep you going. Next time you don’t get away this easy.*” Which Tommy in his semi-conscious state had been more than a little baffled by. Nothing about this was *easy*.

Another lull the following day Tommy spent doing two things, feeding the chickens and sleeping in an effort to recover some of his energy, even post-revival his whole body had been sore and bruised, and now there had been today’s round ending with an axe in his arm. And Dream gives no sign of stopping. Maybe they’ll hit a dry spell and it won’t rain for weeks. Tommy knows that would definitely result into him actually *missing* being hunted for sport because at least he got to go outside. Even now, some part of Tommy thinks it might be worth it. Losing being outside had been one of his greater fears going back to Dream, so maybe it’s not so bad if he spends every moment on the surface running for his life.

Dream hasn’t been killing him very much, not in the way he did before, at least. It’s like he treats killing Tommy as just a method of easier transport. Tommy isn’t sure what to make of it, if Dream is dropping all pretenses of this being about *experiments* or *finding immortality*, but those excuses had at least made Dream’s behavior a tiny bit more predictable.

Speaking of Dream’s excuses.

Tommy hates that he almost misses Punz.

It’s not like Punz has *ever* fucking bothered with the *I’m your friend* routine that Dream used on occasion, but it was nice to have someone who perceived him, however coldly, as a human being rather than a favorite toy.

And part of him wonders if maybe Dream got tired of pretending to view Punz as a person and had just killed him too.

Tommy hopes the rest of the day he can just rest. After he’s hunted he spends the day locked in his cell, because as Dream pointed out, getting to go get food and take care of his stupid fucking chickens was a reward on those days, one he didn’t earn. So far Tommy has survived because of the few days Dream couldn’t take him out. He knows if it starts raining nonstop, he’ll need to figure out a way to win. Not just for his own sake.

“*Wake up.*”

Tommy wakes up on the floor of the dome. He's usually cleaned of mud by the time he gets down here, getting dragged through the ocean will do that, although it's annoying when the salt dries to his skin. Tommy is confused. He should be left in lockup for the rest of the day, but he's out now, and now he sees why. Dream and Punz are both looking at him.

Tommy struggles to sit up, staring at them warily. "...ayup?"

Neither of them acknowledge him other than the fact that he is alive now, Punz turning to Dream, extending a hand. Dream is holding a revive book.

"I've got it," Dream says coolly.

"It was my idea," Punz snaps back.

Dream laughs, "okay, *and?* So what. *I* have the book, so I get to do it."

"D-Do what?" Tommy asks.

"We're not gonna kill you," is Punz's version of a reassurance. "I want to see if we can use the revivebook to restore more than one life."

"Well, actually, after we do this part we *will* have to kill him to see if it worked," Dream points out.

"Yeah, but not yet," Punz seems annoyed by Dream pointing that out.

Tommy is quickly trying to calculate the odds of this being horribly painful. It is either going to be painless, or some new otherworldly sort of suffering he can't yet comprehend. Bit of a toss up.

"Punz, maybe you should step back? You still have 3 lives, I don't know if that would impact it," Dream says.

Punz clearly wants to snap back at Dream's stupid attempt to get him to buzz out of his own idea, but he just takes one sarcastic step back.

Dream opens the book.

Tommy hasn't seen a revival from this side of things yet, he flinches as the book bursts into flames. Then, nothing.

Dream stares at where the book had been, looking over at Punz, who frowns, equally at a loss.

Then Tommy looks up.

A man wearing Dream's mask hovers above them.

"Oh shit," Tommy says weakly.

This causes his two captors to look up. Punz goes for his crossbow but Dream quickly stops him.

“No! No— It’s XD! Don’t be stupid, put it down!” Dream says quickly.

Tommy feels a deep, low hum vibrate through his chest, like when he leaned against the jukebox speakers in Limbo, and it takes him a second to realize it’s from a voice emanating from the figure above.

“What do you want?”

Dream takes a few more steps back, looking up at a figure *almost* a mirror to himself. Something about XD just felt... *bigger*. He didn’t actually occupy any more space than Dream, it was his presence, filling the room. Dream thinks to reply.

“...what?”

XD comes lower to the ground, staring at the three of them. He shows no sympathy for the boy clearly half starved and bruised on the ground, but nor does he show any interest in his summoners either.

“You use the book constantly. What else do you want? Make it quick.”

Tommy is impulsive, and a fucking *genius*. “Get me out of here!” Tommy scrambles to his feet, “please, *please* j-just help me, just get me out—”

And then Tommy is gone.

Dream, Punz, and even XD are frozen for a moment, staring at the space he had once occupied, the only sound the slight splash of the water as it fills in the space he had been standing in.

“Oh fuck—” Punz bolts for the corridor.

“Bring him back!” Dream shouts at XD.

“Uh, no. Why would I give you more than one wish?”

“Why the fuck did you do what *he* asked?! *I’m* the one who summoned you!” Dream snaps.

XD doesn’t move, there is no body language to read, but then Dream feels like a sledge hammer rammed into his chest as he’s sent flying back into the wall, disoriented, by the time he comes to, XD is gone.

Tommy’s eyes struggle to adjust to the outside light, he’s staring at spruce trees, and beyond that, a messy wall of mismatched materials.

He’s at spawn.

Holy fuck— HE’S AT SPAWN—

“*HELP!*” Tommy sprints for the archway, he knows he’s got fucking *seconds* before they take him back, he scrambles onto the prime path. “*SOMEBODY! PLEASE–!*” Tommy almost knocks over a familiar face in a sonic onesie.

“Oh, thank *fuck–*” Tommy almost laughs, hysterical and desperate, grabbing onto Connor’s shoulders. “It’s underwater, it’s *deep* underwater in a cave and there are glow squids and-a- and it’s near an ocean monument! It *might* be near a jungle but don’t bet on that because that bit might not fucking matter, okay?!” Tommy shakes Connor’s shoulders, about to knock him over with the desperate energy inside of him, Connor looks stunned, almost uncomprehending. Tommy feels a sob rise in his throat. Finally he’s looking at the face of a person who *wants* him to be okay, “*please*, y-you have to help me,” his voice shakes, and Tommy can’t stop himself from throwing his arms around Connor’s shoulders, clinging to him in a desperate hug, and in the moment before Tommy jolts back, for a second it seemed like Connor was hugging back, but Tommy lets go, a jolt of terrible realization hitting him, “*WAIT IT’S P–*”

And then he’s gone.

And Connor is left alone on the prime path. Connor laughs weakly, staring at the place Tommy had just been standing with bewildered helplessness. “Ohhh, no one is going to believe me,” he says to no one.

“–*PUNZ!* Oh fuck,” Tommy is back in darkness. “T-That wouldn’t happen to count as a successful escape, would it?”

Tommy’s eyes adjust to the darkness just in time to see Punz swinging at him. Tommy is too startled to even try to flinch away as his fist slams into his left eye, sending Tommy reeling back, but then Punz has him by the collar, pale and livid with fury.

“You just said my name– You just said my *fucking name!* Who did you talk to?!” Punz slams him into the wall, knocking the wind out of him.

“N-No, I d-didn’t get the chance, I–” Tommy wheezes, struggling to draw breath, dizzy as his head throbs from the impact as well. “I don’t…”

“Focus up, Tommy!” Punz slaps him across the face hard enough Tommy’s left ear rings slightly, but Punz still doesn’t let go. “Who the fuck did you talk to?!”

“I didn’t say your name in time, okay? I–” Tommy tries to explain with an ounce of calm, but Punz has no patience for anything but answers.

“Tell me who you fucking talked to, then!” Punz snarls. Out of the corner of his eye he sees Dream enter into the stasis room, a hand to his ribs.

Dream stops, staring at Punz holding a terrified Tommy against the wall. “Ohhh, he told someone in the Mainlands about you?” Dream tuts him, but he definitely sounds smug. “Well, that’s it then, right? No more civilization for you! You should definitely make Tommy pay for that.”

“N-No, I swear!” Tommy shouts, hoarse and hysterical, his hands try to push Punz away before the man can throttle him. “I didn’t get to say anything!” His voice trembles and he knows he’s starting to cry, but Tommy is so fucking scared and he doesn’t know how to survive Punz’s wrath, he’s never had to before. “I-I said we were under water– and-and I said there was an ocean monument, but I *didn’t*, Punz, I swear!”

Dream tilts his head, considering him carefully. “Y’know. I don’t believe him,” he says with far too much calm. “Tommy is a *great* little liar. I mean, that’s what got me screwed over last time! You might want to try breaking something, that usually gets him rambling a little faster.”

Tommy stares with wide petrified eyes from Dream’s soulless mask to Punz’s expression, Punz isn’t just furious, he’s *scared*. Oddly enough Tommy doesn’t feel any sympathy for the guy as he grabs him by the hair, throwing him to the ground, Tommy too stunned to even try to resist. Tommy sees Dream leave him and he isn’t sure if that’s a good thing or not.

“I didn’t, I fucking swear, I didn’t–” Tommy rambles, half incoherent, cut off by Punz’s Netherite boot crushing his hand. Tommy screams, tears welling in his eyes as his fingers crunch and break.

“You still said my name!” Punz crouches down, grabbing Tommy by the collar of his shirt, pulling him from the ground. “*So who did you talk to?*”

Tommy cannot say Connor’s name. If he does, Punz will kill him. “Y-You don’t understand! I didn’t get to say anything! You took me back before I could, *please*, I–”

“If that’s the fucking case, then just tell me who you *fucking talked to!*” Punz pulls Tommy up to meet his fist halfway, feeling the boy’s nose burst and break under the blow, blood gushing down his face, covering Punz’s hand. He feels it, but he’s not really aware of it. Punz is only aware of the blood pounding in his ears and the necessity of Tommy fucking telling him before whoever it is spreads it to everyone on the goddamn server. Punz has been irritable for days, this pushed him over the edge in more ways than one and now all he can do is break Tommy open until he gets what he wants.

“I c-can’t–” Tommy’s voice is now muddled by the blood half down his throat as well as sobs, because no matter what he says it seems like Punz isn’t slowing down, because Tommy *cannot give Punz a name*–

Punz throws Tommy back against the wall, Tommy hitting it hard, losing what little air he could get into his lungs as he collapses to the ground. “I won’t stop until you fucking tell me, Tommy!” Punz stands over him, hands pressed to the stonebrick to keep himself steady so he’s free to kick Tommy in the ribs with reckless abandon. Tommy cannot try to crawl away, Punz has him cornered, so he tries to curl inward, instinctively going to protect his vital organs but that means his already broken fingers receive another scream inducing blow, the pain shuddering up his arm alongside *definitely* cracked ribs.

“Get off him,” Dream’s calm, cocky tone comes from the doorway again.

Punz is hellbent on continuing, but he spares a glance in Dream’s direction and backs away.

Tommy, one eye already starting to swell, sees why.

“You have two chances to fess up, Tommy!” Dream says cheerfully. Underneath either arm, he has Tommy’s chickens.

“No!” Tommy screams raggedly, voice breaking as he fights to sit up, struggling to stand. “Please! Please, they didn’t do anything wrong– I swear I didn’t get to say it! *Please!* J-Just hurt me instead!”

Punz has stepped back. His knuckles ache, his right one burning where the skin split against Tommy’s face. He doesn’t step toward Tommy, he doesn’t tell Dream to stop, but he feels sick.

“No, Tommy,” Dream says scoldingly. Both of the chickens have started squirming, unsettled by all the noise Tommy is making. “You’re gonna be good and tell Punz what he wants to know, right?” He says it like he’s talking to a toddler, like he doesn’t hold Tommy’s sanity under either arm, their wings pinned to their sides.

So Tommy turns to Punz, eyes wide and manic as he exhales and sprays blood from his nose, wiping it onto his already bloody arm, “please, Punz, *please*, you have to believe me, I talked to someone, but I fucking *swear* I didn’t get to say shit about you, I *swear*.”

Tommy is on his knees, pleading with him, and Punz just stares. He doesn’t know what to do now. If he should even bother believing him.

Dream sighs loudly, dropping one of the chickens. Berta indignantly clucks and Tommy lunges toward her, Dream had raised his boot but before he can give the killing blow Tommy has the furious bird tucked against his chest, his forehead pressed to the ground as he holds her close to his chest, shielding her with his body, every vertebrae on his spine is visible, he can’t keep her safe any more than he can defend himself, Berta is scratching at him in a panic but Tommy doesn’t let go, as if he could keep her safe. She didn’t want to be touched or held, this isn’t fair to her but he cannot let her go.

“*Please, please please please please–*” Tommy’s voice is high and soft, a pleading whisper even as more blood drips down his arms, through his now shredded shirt as Berta does everything in her power to get free.

“Come on, Tommy. Don’t be a baby,” Dream sighs. “What do you think you’re gonna accomplish? I’m *literally* holding another one.” He drops Linda.

“No!” Tommy manages to keep Berta close with one arm, voice breaking as he shrieks like he’s being crushed instead, but it’s too late. Dream brings his boot down and the chicken stops moving. Tommy collapses forward, eyes blurred by tears even as he clings to Berta, chest heaving with sobs. “No! You didn’t have t-to– *you didn’t have to fucking do that!*” Tommy screams at him. Dream takes one step toward him and Tommy scrambles back, his eyes terribly wide, something feral there as he clings to Berta, trying to shield her with his body once more.

“Now, Tommy, are you gonna tell Punz who you were talking to or not?” Dream has his hands on his hips like a disappointed teacher and Tommy is too hysterical to even feel annoyed by that.

“Punz, please, *please please please* believe me, I d-didn’t tell *anyone* about you, *please*,” Tommy’s words stumble out around his sobs and still Punz doesn’t move.

“Hold him,” Dream says and it takes Punz a second to realize he’s talking to him. Dream grows more irritated when Punz doesn’t move. “Do you want to know how screwed you are or not?”

Punz’s fear wakes up again and suddenly he finds himself capable of going toward Tommy, prying his vice-like grip away from where he cradles that stupid chicken to his chest.

“Ow!” Punz jumps back as Tommy manages to bite him on his forearm. Punz finds it far too easy to slap Tommy again, disorienting him long enough that he can get ahold of his incredibly skinny wrists and pry them back.

“NO!” Tommy snarls, kicking furiously as Dream grabs the other chicken from him. “*Please*, Dream! *Please I fucking swear I didn’t say anything else!*” He’s voice is hoarse and cracked as he screams loud enough to break it but he’s helpless against Punz holding him back. “*I swear*— Please don’t hurt her, *please*— I swear it— I swear to every fucking god I didn’t say anything else—”

Dream pauses, holding Berta against his side, his other hand hovering over her neck. “When you say *every* god,” Dream seems to ease up for a moment, hand pulling back, shifting his weight. “Does that include me?”

Tommy’s breathing rattles around his cracked ribs as he stares up at that white mask, no longer struggling against Punz keeping his arms pinned back. For a moment, Punz and Berta fade out and yet again it’s just him and Dream, it’s Dream *pushing* and Tommy being tasked with the right response to bear it. Tommy’s voice does not sound unsure, even if it’s cracked and weak, as he looks up at Dream and says, “yes.”

“Huh,” Dream sounds pleased. He breaks the chicken’s neck.

“No!” Tommy lunges forward as Punz’s grip goes slack, but it’s too late. They’re both dead.

“Punz, I think I believe him,” Dream almost has to shout over Tommy’s sobbing. “Grab him for me, will you?”

Punz doesn’t move, but Dream doesn’t take offense. He picks Tommy up off the ground, Tommy snarling like an animal, kicking furiously, but his body is already so battered he’s running out of fight. Dream drags him down the corridor. Tommy realizes where they’re going.

“No! Stop it! Please, I’ll be good! I’ll be good I’LL BE GOOD I’LL BE GOOD—” Tommy screams himself hoarse, broken down enough that he becomes a broken record, pleading to

the echo of his own voice down the corridor, over and over, *“I’LL BE GOOD I’LL BE GOOD I’LL BE GOOD–”*

He’s only silenced when Dream throws him forward into the wall of the smaller dark cell. Tommy jolts to his feet just time to slam into the closed off wall of obsidian. Tommy can reach either wall with little effort, the ceiling low enough to brush against his hair, and Tommy can only think of the broken bodies of those two little animals he had tried to keep alive. When Tommy starts screaming next, there are no words, only incoherency as he wails out his hysteria and grief into walls closing in, tugging at his own hair and throwing his already broken body against the wall until he’s finally too weak to stand.

Punz is still standing in the stasis room, staring down at the feathers and the blood on the ground.

“You’re still here?” Dream notes, poking his head back in. “Ugh, gross,” he stares at the mess he himself had made. “Could you take care of that for me? And don’t forget, we need to have Tommy set up his stasis pearl again.”

“Aren’t you angry?” Punz glances at Dream, voice oddly weak, he feels disconnected from it. “With Tommy for what he did?”

Dream shrugs. “No offense, but him outing you doesn’t change much for me. And we’ve punished him, so now we’re even! I’m not gonna stay mad at the little brat now.”

Punz doesn’t respond. Dream leaves anyway. He stares down at his hands. Punz is a mercenary. He’s killed before. He’s hurt people to send a message on occasion.

Punz had just beat a kid senseless on the off chance he’d done something, something that Punz now realizes, if Tommy had said his name, none of this would’ve mattered. Knowing who he told wouldn’t have mattered because whoever it was would’ve told half the server immediately.

Meaning, what Punz had just done had not been an interrogation nor a necessity, but a punishment. Punz isn’t sure if he’s imagining it, but for a moment he thinks through the dense rock, the distant layer of obsidian, he can faintly hear Tommy’s screams.

Chapter End Notes

Been waiting to get to this one.

But like. Sorry.

Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

CW: dead animals, injuries, suicidal tendencies, claustrophobia. I think that covers it.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Punz stares down at a mess of feathers and gore. He feels vaguely nauseous.

“Dream, could I have a couple copies of the revivebook?”

“Uh, why?” Dream scoffs.

“I mean, you don’t want to do research stuff right now, I still do. So, could I test it on the chickens?” Punz is careful. He asks for permission because he knows Dream will take his request more seriously that way.

“Okay, I’ll grab a couple, but don’t let Tommy see them alive,” Dream shrugs. “I mean, unless you wanna kill them in front of him again, but that seems a bit cruel.”

Punz forces himself not to look back down at the tiny bodies on the floor. *That seems a bit cruel.* Punz doesn’t say a word until Dream returns with two copies of the book. “Thanks,” Punz is quick to put them in his inventory. “So, like, how’d you memorize it if the moment a book opens it bursts into flames?” He’d thought about this for a while, and Dream still seems to be coming down from the adrenaline high of hurting Tommy, so might as well ask now.

“Oh, no that’s not how it works,” Dream laughs. “You gotta burn the book to activate it, but *making* it burn, that’s all me. Y’know the potion you put on arrows to make them flaming arrows?”

“...yeah?”

“Well, it doesn’t stay lit in your inventory or quiver or whatever, right? It lights when its fired,” Dream says.

“Yeah. When it moves through the air.”

“Bingo!” Dream claps. “So, the act of opening the book, there’s enough airflow that it ignites. I pour it all along the binding, so it burns *quick*.”

“Huh,” Punz is calculating. “What if you need to read it? Is there a way to open it without igniting it?”

“Uh, no,” Dream scoffs. “I have copies like that in my enderchest.”

“Right,” Punz says more gloomily now.

“Again, no giving Tommy his precious pets back,” Dream says warningly. “And don’t let him out either, that room– he’s supposed to stew in it for a while, got it?”

“Why would I want to go near him right now?” Punz says irritably. “That’s why I wanted to use the chickens, ‘cause I don’t want to deal with him anymore today, alright?”

Dream shrugs. “Fine, fine. I’ve got some stuff to do, so. I’m actually heading out. Again, at some point don’t forget we’ve got to get him to reset the stasis pearl.”

Punz stares at him, eyes narrowed. “What do *you* have to do right now?”

“Well, I don’t *have* to, and I don’t have to do it right *now*,” Dream meanders toward the dome. “I want to. Y’know? It’s healthy for a guy to have a hobby.”

“Uh huh,” Punz says flatly. His knuckles still hurt. They’re going to bruise. He should put a health pot on them before he goes back to the Mainlands so it doesn’t blatantly look like he beat the hell out of someone.

“Later, Punz,” Dream gives him a sarcastic salute before downing his water breathing potion and ascending the ladder to the trap door. He seems utterly unaffected by the events of the past hour.

Punz stands in the silence, and on impulse, he listens. He can’t hear screaming anymore, if he ever actually had. So he goes back to the stasis room and, refusing to look at them, puts the two dead chickens in his inventory. Gross.

He has his two copies of the revive book.

Dream was quite right that he couldn’t show Tommy his beloved pets, because Punz only has two copies and he cannot revive them down here and get them to the surface alive.

“What the fuck am I doing...” Punz mutters. These chickens, he has no idea where Dream found them. He can’t just dump them in the woods somewhere for them to get torn apart by foxes.

So it’s another trek through the wilderness, back to the Mainlands. In that case, he has no clue when he’ll be back here. And part of him wants to wait until he’s actually *done it* before he makes any announcements, but it’s not like it matters. Punz doesn’t even know why he’s fucking doing this in the first place.

So, with bruises still forming on his knuckles, and the dead animals hidden out of sight in his inventory, Punz turns around and goes right where Dream told him not to go.

Punz pauses outside, listening. He hears nothing. He’s anxious. Why the hell should he be anxious right now? It’s *Tommy*. Punz sighs. He pulls the lever to open the door.

Tommy flinches at the sudden return of light before curling tightly into a ball, hands covering his head. He’s trembling, his back facing the doorway and yet again even through Tommy’s

bloody t shirt Punz can see his spine.

“Tommy?” Punz doesn’t know what else to say.

Tommy somehow tries to make himself even smaller.

Punz steps closer and realizes that Tommy is *talking*. A desperate, babbling mantra, voice high and hoarse and barely a whisper.

“Please don’t– *please don’t please don’t please don’t please don’t*–” Tommy whispers his frantic mantra until he’s breathless. He doesn’t understand. *The room* was supposed to be the punishment, *it is* the punishment, so why did Dream send Punz in here to hurt him again?!

“Tommy...” Punz’s voice is weaker now, the audacity to project an ounce of sympathy, he crouches down and reaches a hand out and Punz almost thinks Tommy flinches *before* Punz actually touches him, like Tommy’s hypervigilance extended to the very air around him, but either way in an instant Tommy jumps like he’s been struck by lightning, but he could barely get away in the old dark cell and this one even less so, so he can only press himself into the corner barely three feet away from Punz.

Silence, both of them just staring at each other, Punz doesn’t move an inch, his hand still extended to where he’d intended to touch Tommy’s shoulder, and Tommy wired like a spring save for the rapid rise and fall of his chest. His chest is *shredded* as well. His shirt wasn’t in great condition before and now it’s torn apart and stained with blood from the many scratches covering his chest. His arms are in the same condition, some of them gauging shockingly deep. And his nose is a mess of blood, crooked too. His eye is properly swollen shut now, his bottom lip bruised as well and a bruise forming on his cheek just above his jaw. Punz doesn’t remember half the bruises on this kid’s face. And then he sees his hands.

This he does remember. He just hadn’t thought about it. Tommy’s right hand, his fingers remain at incorrect angles, a disgusting array of swollen and purple skin.

Punz doesn’t have a health pot. He doesn’t have anything that would help with this. He stares at Tommy’s hands until Tommy notices and tucks his knees into his chest and cradled his broken hand protectively close.

“I’m not gonna...” Punz’s voice breaks. He clears his throat, continuing on more steady, but still quieter. “I’m not gonna hurt you.”

A strange, whimpering laugh bubbles up from Tommy’s lips before he can stop himself. Tommy’s unbroken hand covers his mouth quickly, as if expecting consequences for even that.

“Fuck,” Punz huffs, sitting back on the ground across from him.

Tommy scowls, clearly wanting to say something, but unwilling to considering a lot of things. *What the fuck do you have to be upset about?*

“Look, I’m... sorry,” Punz winces. “About the... about the chickens.”

“About...” Tommy says, staring at him warily. *About the chickens. Not sorry for bashing my fucking face in, though.*

Punz stares at him grimly. There’s nothing he can do for Tommy here and he’ll gladly take an excuse to leave. Punz stands and Tommy flinches, unbroken hand going to protect his face immediately, knees tucked into his chest in the hopes that if Punz starts kicking him again he might be able to dodge another broken rib.

“I’m going to bring back your stupid pets,” Punz mutters.

Tommy stares up at him through his fingers. “...the fuck d’you mean?”

“Look, I can’t...” Punz fishes the revive books out of his inventory. “I can’t revive them down here to prove it to you, because I only have the two and I can’t get them to the surface alive, but... I mean, why would I tell you this for no reason?”

Tommy is doing some fast calculations. “I don’t understand.”

“And like, you won’t be able to *see* them, or whatever, but if you take my word for it that they’re, y’know, not dead and I can even take them back to the Mainlands. Give them to... I don’t know, someone on the server who won’t kill them,” Punz almost feels like he’s bargaining. He doesn’t know for what.

Tommy stares at him, like he’s making a conscious effort not to trust him. “Why are you doing this?” Tommy asks it like an accusation.

Punz doesn’t have an answer for him. “Look, I don’t have to be doing any of this, let alone telling you, so—” Punz turns to leave.

“Did you take Wil’s body?” Tommy bursts out.

“What?” Punz looks back at him incredulously.

Tommy looks at him, less afraid now, more desperate. “When I first got out. Dream told me he was gonna take Wilbur and I tried to get to him first but he was already gone. Was that you?”

Punz stares at Tommy, puzzled and oddly compelled to answer him. “Uh, yeah? I mean, I moved him a couple hours after Callahan dropped him off.”

Tommy considers this carefully, nodding, looking deep in thought. “Okay... okay, and did you ever...” Tommy frowns, struggling with something internally. “Did you ever watch me?”

“*What?*” Punz says it sharply and offensively enough that Tommy clams back up, pressing himself into the wall and hunching his shoulders, eyes closed tightly as he braces for a blow. Punz doesn’t move, not toward him nor away. “What the hell are you talking about?”

Tommy opens his good eye a hair, and when he doesn't see a knife or a fist coming his way he lets go of a bit of the tension he carries. "Did you..." Tommy doesn't know how to say it. "In Snowchester. The door was left open. And I could..." Tommy knows he sounds insane. "I could *feel* it."

Punz stares down at Tommy, looking, for lack of a more apt description for a reaction to Tommy saying something vaguely disturbing, looking deeply uncomfortable.

Tommy scowls. "So, you were—"

"No," Punz says sharply. Tommy flinches. Punz grudgingly takes a step back. "No, I wasn't fucking *watching you*. At one point I lied and said I spotted Dream by L'Manberg to get people over there, and I hid some book Dream gave me in your room in the safehouse. And when he told me to activate his stasis chamber so he could get out of the Mainlands quick, I did. Okay? I did stuff like that, I wasn't—" Punz's eyebrows furrow together. "I wasn't *watching you*, fucking hell..."

Tommy nods slowly, considering this. Okay. Fair enough. Meaning, Dream definitely was watching him. And this explains those moments Tommy had been convinced Dream was in the room with him only for him to not be there.

"Why?"

Punz shifts irritably. He wants to leave, but instead he says "*why* what?"

"Why'd you do that shit for him?" Tommy says it like an accusation. He wipes absentmindedly at the blood still clogging his nose. "Why'd you do... why'd you do any of it?"

Punz hesitates for another moment. "I'll take care of your fucking birds, okay?" And with that, he steps back and pulls the lever. Tommy doesn't try to stop him as the obsidian seals him in once more, but he watches him until he's back in the darkness with nothing to distract him from his pain.

Tommy doesn't know what to think. Dream never felt *remorse*. Punz had generally apologized in the same bullshit way Dream did, saying sorry only for the bits that weren't his fault, but Punz had reached out, he'd offered to do something without expecting anything in return. Well, so *far* not expecting anything in return, if Punz expects him to do anything for him he should've at least thought of proof that he did as he said he would.

Unless he purely did it out of guilt. Because that seems to be the case, despite not apologizing for it, Punz feels *guilty* for beating the shit out of him. It's a low bar, but that's still worth something to Tommy. It's harder for him to believe right now, still a mess of broken bones and bruises, but Tommy is almost relieved that Punz snapped. At least now he has a better idea of what Punz is capable of. Every time Tommy gets the urge to be stupid around him, he'll remember this. Broken fingers and all. Tommy lays down on the floor, but he can't even lie flat all the way, his knees have to be folded slightly. Tommy tries not to let that panic him.

He's distracted enough by his pain that he doesn't feel the need to claw at the walls yet. Maybe that should count for something.

"What if they never bring you a health pot?" Tommy mutters to the empty cell. "What if they just leave you like this, eh? Maybe it's..." Tommy swallows thickly. "Maybe it'll be like last time and he'll leave you in here until the thirst kills you again." Tommy shudders, the motion causing the obsidian to scrape roughly against his already bruised back. "Okay... okay you're on your own, so you gotta do some fixin'. If you don't set the bones, they don't heal right," Tommy struggles to sit up, his head pounding, his eye, still swollen, throbs horribly.

Tommy cannot see his hands. He cannot make out *anything*. Maybe eventually he'll adjust to pitch blackness enough for shapes, but right now it's not good enough.

Wait. Can I get air or not?

Tommy stands, approaching the wall he's pretty sure was the doorway. There is no thin line at the top of it, he feels along with his unbroken hand.

"Good..." Tommy murmurs. "That's good, you'll die pretty quick..." Just to check, Tommy fumbles around in the dark. He hates how this reminds him of how little the space is. Sometimes he can feel his hair brushing against the ceiling and it makes him flinch. He feels a pang of disappointment. At the top of the back wall is a thin crack that if he focuses enough, he can feel air moving through it. Tommy settles back on the floor. This is not going to be fun figuring it out by touch alone.

Tommy's unbroken hand finds his broken one, and just the act of struggling to get to that point is met with sharp pain. *Even if you set the bones, there's nothing to hold them. They can just come unset you fucking idiot.*

Tommy doesn't know what else to do. So he tries to straighten his first finger and finally he sees something— spots of white flashing across his vision as he collapses against the wall, breathless.

The amount of broken bones he's dealt with, he'd thought he'd be a bit more numb to it by now.

Tommy gives it one more try, but the pain is just as piercing as before, if not worse. Tommy feels a wave of nausea from it and decides to call it quits. Puking is probably the only way he can make this whole situation actually worse for himself.

It's not merely the broken bones, or the physical pain at all, in fact— It's the nonstop brutality of the past hours. Punz changing the rules Tommy had come to expect, and Dream deciding to punish him on top of that. Those stupid fucking birds— He knew— He *knew* not to get attached, and he went and fucked that up, didn't he? *Fuck.*

This is already so *hard*. Tommy had decided he would try to escape, whatever it took. He can't have really forgotten how grotesque the consequences were. The only good to come out of this— now that the chickens are dead, they can't be used to hurt him anymore.

They still died. They still died and it wasn't fucking fair and now you're alone.

I don't want to be alone in this.

Tommy closes his eyes, a shaky inhale. He knows how bad crying can hurt with an eye swollen shut, sobs are hellish on busted ribs, but he's just so *tired*. "I wanna go home..." Tommy murmurs into the dark. He doesn't expect a reply. The silence hurts anyway.

~

Wilbur and Tubbo haven't yet tried to kill each other from the boredom, but it is getting closer. They can wander the platforms of New L'Manberg freely, there's nowhere to hide explosives there, but other than that, unless they plan on asking someone with lives to spare to make a trail for them, they can't go anywhere. Half the server seems to be shut in now, which is fair considering the risks that come with being outside at all now.

They had both decided that, when Phil is gone— the man who is famous for being on one life, he gets to wander freely because no one has the heart to argue when *Technoblade* is his escort, even if no one really knows how many lives Techno has— they will keep some distance from one another. If one of them is outside, the other is inside, if it's raining, one will take the loft and the other will remain downstairs.

That means it is Tubbo who first spots Connor, not *running* toward them, more so a very nervous half jog where he keeps on stopping or watching the ground for, Tubbo assumes, tripwires and the like. Tubbo doesn't go out to meet him halfway, just waits, sitting on the edge of one of the empty stalls of New L'Manberg, watching his approach with mild interest.

"H-Hi Tubbo!" Connor says with a nervous laugh. "I, I need to talk to you. And... and probably the other Team-Tommy gang, ya know?"

Now Tubbo is alert, standing, gaze now far more piercing. "Why?"

Connor hesitates, "uhhh," he inhales through his teeth, wincing. "Okay, okay, so, this might seem a little *out of nowhere*, a little out of left field—" another frantic laugh. "But like, you gotta believe me, man, I mean, I was right last time, s-so—"

"*Connor*," Tubbo grabs him by the shoulders. "What the fuck are you talking about, and what does this have to do with Tommy?"

"I mean, *have to do with him* is a bit of an understatement, 'cuz, okay, I *saw* him? I don't know, like— And I know what you're thinking— 'whoa, that guy's nuts! What's he talking about?' but I want you to remember that *last* time I said something nuts— hey, where're you going?" Connor is still rambling, but Tubbo has already turned around and rushed back into the house.

"Wilbur! Get down here! Message Phil and Techno or— or whoever! I'll get Sapnap and Ranboo over here," Tubbo is typing furiously on his comm, Connor following him more hesitantly into the house.

“Whoa, whoa before you call in the troops, like, he kinda sorta disappeared right in front of me, alright? Like, the kid is gone,” Connor follows him quickly.

Tubbo turns around, his tone changing dramatically, looking wary. “He... I think you should start explaining better, for your sake.”

“Look, I *said* you weren’t gonna believe me, but I swear, like. He ran out of spawn and like, he touched me too, so he wasn’t like a... a *mirage*,” Connor makes a wiggly sort of hand movement, indicating a mirage apparently, “or something, ‘cause he...” Connor hesitates, looking less nervous and more somber. “He hugged me. He looked...” Connor trails off, unsettled. “Look, the point is he told me some shit before he disappeared, okay?”

Wilbur hears the commotion and quickly stows one of Phil’s knives in his coat. He wasn’t planning on using it, but Tubbo’s reluctance to pursue Wilbur’s idea with Ghostbur, he’d grabbed in just in case. Now, in quiet moments, he can’t help but fiddle with it. He didn’t know when he’d next be left alone, *properly* alone, he wouldn’t kill himself in front of Tubbo *again*, so he keeps it hidden and joins them.

Tubbo looks unsure now, Wilbur having descended the ladder.

“He disappeared?” Wilbur frowns, unsure of what to make of Connor from what he’s heard. The man helped save Tommy, but there’s a certain tone of exasperation everyone seems to have when discussing his apparent assistance.

“Uh, yeah,” Connor says awkwardly. “Sorry.”

“Just— Just fucking hold on a minute, Connor, once the others get here—” Tubbo is utterly restless.

Connor shrugs. “Sorry, man, like, I didn’t *think* anyone would believe me, just thought I’d try—”

“What?” Tubbo glances back to him. “It’s not that I don’t believe you, Connor.”

Connor blinks, startled. “It’s... not?”

“Last time I thought you said something fucking insane, you were very much correct,” Tubbo says. “Bit ridiculous if I don’t believe you now.”

“Oh!” Connor says, pleasantly surprised. “Cool. So, do you wanna know what he said?”

“Yes— But just wait until the others get here.”

“Oh, uh, okay!”

They’re quick to gather, Ranboo coming first, Sapnap arriving a moment after accompanied by Quackity, and Techno and Phil making the journey from the arctic remarkably fast.

And yet again, Connor is put in the spotlight, but this time they do not all stare at him with doubt or even hostility, but with rapt attention. It makes Connor a little nervous.

“Connor? Can you tell them what you told me? And... And what Tommy said,” Tubbo pushes, clearly trying not to be unkind, but that’s been difficult for him as of late.

“Yeah! Yeah, for sure,” Connor nods. “So, uh. He like, he came running out of spawn? Looked scared as shit, almost knocked me over, and he... and he said...” Connor frowns.

“What?” Wilbur asks.

“Give him a second,” Tubbo snaps.

“Y-Yeah, just, just one sec, it was kinda sudden, I just gotta,” Connor closes his eyes for a moment. “Oh! Yeah, he said: it’s deep underwater. There are glow squids. And it’s by an ocean monument. Then he said– don’t look in jungles– wait, no,” Connor frowns, thinking hard. “He said it might be near a jungle but he didn’t really know? Said that part might not matter.”

Silence. Everyone waiting for him to continue.

Connor glances at all of their intense expressions. “Uh. That’s it. Then...” Connor mimics an explosion with his hands, “poof! He was gone.”

“That’s all?” Wilbur can’t help but be sharp. That’s barely more than he’d already told them.

Connor shrugs. “I mean, he also like, asked me to help him and stuff. And I think he must’ve known he was gonna disappear ‘cause he was talking really fast, and– oh! One more thing, he was trying to say one last bit, he shouted *wait, it’s puh*.” Connor nods sagely like he’s said something meaningful.

“He shouted... he shouted *wait it’s puh*?” Quackity says dryly.

“Well, he disappeared like, right then and there, so, I’m *guessing* it was another word,” Connor responds sarcastically. “Maybe like, *probably* near... some other place. Or... *pine*. Maybe it’s near some spruce trees? Or maybe *prismarine*, ‘cuz it was near an ocean monument.”

“You said *puh*, Connor, so, was it the letter ‘u’ too?” Technoblade asks.

“Nah, not necessarily, just was a ‘p’ sound to start with,” Connor shrugs.

“Okay, refocus,” Tubbo cuts in. “Connor, is there anything else you can tell us? He disappeared like, what, an invis potion?”

Connor shakes his head. “No, his hands were still on my shoulders, he was just *gone*.”

“Wilbur, do you have any idea what might’ve done that?” Tubbo turns to him.

“Why would I know?” Wilbur scowls. He had had a very brief, very foolish moment of desperate hope when Connor had first spoken. That hope had died and rotted in his chest with rapid speed, leaving bitterness in its place.

“What about how Tommy got here in the first place? Is there any way he’s actually not that far from us? I mean, Connor said he was *at spawn*,” Quackity points out.

“Maybe Dream figured out a way to give someone back their three lives, and maybe like... Tommy didn’t have a bed so he respawned back here?” Sapnap offers.

Yet again, too many eyes turn to Wilbur. “D’you know if he ever figured out something like that?”

Wilbur bristles. “Yeah, we chatted about it after he finished cutting my fucking ear in half.”

“Wilbur, you’re the last person to be around Dream that we know of, just– We’re just asking a few questions,” Tubbo cuts in.

“You think I know things– Just like you think I planted fucking bombs on the server,” Wilbur snarls. They’re all looking at *him* like somehow he can still save Tommy– *he can’t fucking save Tommy*.

“Wil,” Phil cuts in warningly. “I know you’re upset, mate, but–”

“But *what*, Phil? What could you *possibly* say to make me feel better?” Wilbur snaps.

“You’re not helping your case, Wilbur, and if you aren’t going to try to help us figure out anything we can to find Tommy, there’s no reason for you to still be here,” Tubbo voices it not like a friend, but like an authority. That offends Wilbur perhaps more than Tubbo basically telling him he’s useless to their cause. They stare each other down, Tubbo’s carefully controlled emotions, maybe anger, maybe something as feeble as irritation, and Wilbur’s childish rage meet in the middle, useless and unresolved.

“Fine, you all have fun looking for puzzle pieces that *aren’t there*.” Wilbur storms off, not back into the house, but out into the server.

Phil goes to follow him. “Wil–”

“Just let him go, Phil. That part of the server has been swept. He won’t get himself blown up. Better let him blow off some steam, then,” Tubbo says.

Phil nods. He doesn’t like it, but he understands.

“Puzzle! That’s another word that starts with p,” Connor offers, as helpful and tactful as a balloon at a funeral.

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Punz makes it back to the Mainlands in one piece. He keeps his hands buried in his pockets until he gets back to his tower. Here, he douses his hands in a splash potion of healing until his bruised knuckles become unnoticeable. That’s step one. Now step two; deal with those stupid fucking chickens.

Punz buries his disgust as he fishes out the dead birds, laying them side by side. He does a quick sweep of his home. He'd chosen a room without windows deliberately. He gets out the revive books. He has to admit he's a bit nervous, considering the god-level mishaps of the last time they'd used this. What if the book actually doesn't work on animals, so he's going to summon an irritable god again?

Punz agreed to fucking do this for that stupid kid, might as well follow through on it. The book burns rapidly and Punz directs his focus on the chicken to the right. It's a disturbing sight, to watch a crushed animal be repaired.

It doesn't seem to know what to do with being alive again, feathers ruffled as it at least stands, but it doesn't do much else. Not that Punz blames it. He gets out the second copy, here he pauses.

You brought back one of them. Maybe you should keep a copy, just in case. You don't want to rely on Dream for it forever.

Punz sighs, irritable. He opens the second book. This resurrection is much less gruesome, only a tiny broken neck.

Okay. Great. Punz has two chickens now. He goes to pick them up, intending on taking them outside. They both run from him, chattering indignantly. Punz can't be fucking bothered. He'll leave the door open. They can go where they want, never mind that he just gave them life.

So Punz leaves them, mission accomplished and irritable. He could've just *lied* to Tommy and said he'd brought them back. If he had he'd still have *two revivebooks*. So why didn't he?

Not a question Punz feels like answering at present. Maybe he'll go bother Sapnap and play hero for a bit, just to distract himself from how fucking stressful the past hours had been.

His musings are answered by Wilbur Soot grabbing him the moment he crosses into the community house.

"Hey Punz," Wilbur has him by the front of his hoodie, hitting him against the brick hard enough that it knocks the wind out of him. Wilbur has a fucking *knife*, the flat of blade pressed to his throat. "You're a shady motherfucker, d'you know that?" Wilbur leans in too close, inches from his face. Punz can smell the cigarettes still faintly on his breath. "You seen Dream lately?"

Punz's instinct is that somehow Wilbur could sense that he had hurt Tommy. Punz had taken care of his bruised knuckles, he'd checked for blood, and Wilbur found him anyway, like he could sniff out his brother's tormentors like a bloodhound. "H-How the fuck did you know—"

Wilbur's eyes widen in surprise and Punz realizes he's fucked up. He feels the flat of the knife turn, it previously not intended as an actual threat, Punz pressing himself into the brick as the edge of the blade brushes too close. He's fucked up *bad*.

“What’re you talking about, Wilbur?” Punz tries again.

Wilbur grins, delighted, manic rage behind his eyes. “Uh, I didn’t know, actually, I’ve just been guessing. *How did I know*—” He laughs, voice high and sharp. “I’m a fucking paranoid *nutcase*, but *thank you* for confirming it!”

“You’re jumping to conclusions, don’t be stupid. I mean, like, how’d you get that idea in your head?” Punz still tries to seem only irritated, but he doesn’t know if he can go back on this.

“No no,” Wilbur taps his chest almost scoldingly. He’s taller than him, Punz pretends that doesn’t change things. “Don’t go back on it. You said it, man. *How did you know*. Can’t turn that one around, my good sir!” Another high, vicious laugh. Wilbur glances frantically in the direction of New L’Manberg. “A-And I think it would be best if you maybe repeat that for the rest of the class, let’s— we should—”

“What, you’re gonna *turn me in*?” Punz scoffs, no longer bluffing. “I thought you wanted to see Tommy again.”

Wilbur had been about to drag him away from the wall, knife still pressed to his throat, but he pauses. “Yes I want to see Tommy again, that’s why we’re going to fucking rip you apart until you tell me where he is,” Wilbur says with something maliciously like joy.

“Y’know, if you turn me in, if I stop showing up, Dream will know something is wrong and Tommy will pay for it. He’ll take him and disappear somewhere I can’t find him,” Punz says, straight to the point. He is not only trying to protect himself, it’s the truth.

Wilbur holds on tighter to the scruff of Punz’s hoodie. “We’d make you message him. You’d come up with some excuse.”

Punz gives him a scathing look, daring to sound bored. “What, you’d torture me until I obeyed? Threaten my life when my only ally has the key to immortality? Say you want me to message him on my comm, all I have to do is say *stasis* and he takes me back. You can’t stop me. Either way, Wilbur, *I* get out of this, and Dream still keeps Tommy.”

“Well, we won’t know until we’ve tried, will we?” Wilbur snarls. “We’d— We’d make *you* set up a stasis chamber so if he pulls you back, we can get you back too—”

“Perfect, I can show up for a second, tell Dream to run, and *you still don’t get Tommy*. What are you not getting, Wilbur?”

Wilbur scowls. “What the fuck do you think I’m going to do here, *let you go*? Not tell a soul?!”

“No. You want to help your brother? Then do it yourself,” Punz leans forward because he knows Wilbur will yield. Punz overestimates him just a bit, as Wilbur hesitates long enough that Punz feels the sharp sting of a shallow cut along his throat, but then Wilbur pulls back. Good. “I’m not telling you anything and even if you turn me in, Dream will just take Tommy and run. What I *will* do is bring you to him. Just like you were planning on doing before.

This isn't personal, Wilbur. Promise. This has nothing to do with you or Tommy. Come on, you know what death is like—immortality feels like a fair goal, doesn't it?"

Wilbur looks deranged, furious and jittery. "Why are you *justifying* yourself to me, then?!"

"Maybe because you're still looking like you're about to cut me open," Punz glances down, unimpressed, to the knife in Wilbur's shaking hand.

Wilbur still doesn't move. So Punz keeps pushing and convinces himself he didn't learn this kind of talk from Dream.

"He's hurt, you know," Punz keeps his tone calm. Too much sympathy, Wilbur will gut him for lying, too cold, Wilbur will slit his throat for being like Dream. "He's getting hurt *really fucking badly* and the only guaranteed way you get to see him again, you get to try to protect him, is by going back. That, or you lose him forever. And he pays for it. You don't wanna know what kind of horror stories I already have."

Wilbur is still frozen, his eyes are unsettlingly glassy. Fuck, is the guy really so unstable that Punz has reduced him to tears? Punz is more uncomfortable than he is afraid at this point.

"Y-You... you took him. Why— Why the *fuck*—" Wilbur stops when his voice shakes, high and hoarse and weak.

"I told you. Nothing personal," Punz pushes Wilbur back and he yields, the knife dropping to his side. "It's a clear choice to me, Wilbur. Either you're guaranteed to at least *be* with him through all this, or you keep me prisoner somewhere while Dream takes Tommy and runs, and then where will we be?"

Wilbur nods sharply. Punz is a trained killer, one of the greatest fighters on the server, and he's still startled by Wilbur's bony fist connecting with his jaw right after the man finally seemed defeated. He hears an unsettling crackle from his bones.

"Okay, fine. Fuck— Just— Just *take me to him*," Wilbur drops the knife. It clatters dully to the crafting table floors, Punz's blood barely dotting the blade. Wilbur shakes out his hand, hissing through his teeth, his knuckles taking as much damage as Punz's face.

Punz cracks his jaw back into place, wincing. The guy's fucking *bones* are sharp. "Come with me."

"What, you're not gonna kill me and drag me away?" Wilbur scoffs.

"Not *yet*. Are you fucking stupid? What, no one is gonna question me carrying your corpse into the Nether?" Punz turns back toward his own home. He hadn't been planning on going back so soon, let alone taking the long way back, but things have changed. Wilbur hasn't moved yet. "What, do you expect me to let you hang around and say your last goodbyes? Either we go right now, or I assume you're gonna bolt and snitch, and I message Dream, got it?"

Wilbur looks in the general direction of New L'Manberg. He had stormed off so bitter, he knows it was unfair to them. He doesn't get to make this right. So he'll try to fix things with Tommy and hope that's enough.

Wilbur follows Punz into his tower, puzzled by the sight of two chickens wandering aimlessly in the courtyard.

"Walk in front of me," Punz still doesn't trust Wilbur not to change his mind and bolt.

Wilbur scowls, clearly preferring the thought of going back for that knife, but he does as he's told.

"Stop there for a minute," Punz orders. He goes to his stores, grabbing a few health potions and a replacement water breathing potion for his enderchest. "Come on. I want to keep away from the main highways— go down the stairs over there."

Wilbur does as he's told.

He continues to follow Punz's instructions with weary irritation until they make it to the Nether roof and wander maybe a few hundred blocks. There's that quiet voice in the back of his mind, a weak insistence, *you're making the wrong choice. Once you disappear, that's it. No one knows what Punz is. No one finds either of you.*

What're you supposed to do? Leave Tommy alone?

"Okay, that's far enough," Punz shakes him from his thoughts, a random patch of endless wastes that make up the Nether roof. Wilbur turns around, hunched forward, hands buried in his pockets. He's tired. His legs hurt. He never quite got used to being alive again. Punz takes out his sword. "Now I'm gonna kill you."

Wilbur steps back.

"What?" Punz sighs, annoyed. "I thought this was what you wanted?"

It is what he wanted. Wilbur wanted to die. His death assisting Tommy is almost too well tailored to him. Wilbur maybe hesitates only because his enthusiasm is wrong. He knows it's wrong. Tommy wouldn't like it. That doesn't stop him from nodding, closing his eyes, a morbid reflection of Tommy too accepting this fate too easily. He'll see Tommy soon. Maybe that counts for something as he waits for the end. Punz obliges.

Chapter End Notes

HEY!!!

I made a discord!!! :D

If you would like to scream about this fic with other people who Also scream about this fic.

[please join us <3](#)

if u wanna idk.

Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

CW: claustrophobia, descriptions of injuries, threats, abuse, dehumanization, self harm.
You know the drill.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Ghostbur hums as he drifts back toward home. He hasn't been home in a long time, he thinks. Ghostbur sees the hillside where his sewer lays and quickens his pace, excited by the thought of maybe picking up a few invis potions. He could play pranks, if he wants! He could play a prank on Tommy. He loves playing pranks with Tommy.

He can't seem to remember the last time he saw Tommy.

Out of the corner of his eye, he sees movement and turns toward the platforms of New L'Manberg. He sees Phil! He hasn't spoken with Phil in a long time either, he supposes. Phil doesn't seem to notice him, collecting dishes from the stalls outside, before proceeding back into the house, but Ghostbur doesn't mind, he follows.

"Hi, Phil!"

Phil jumps, turning to face him, and for a brief moment he almost looks relieved.
"Ghostbur! Sorry, I thought you--"

Phil pales. The glass he had still had in his hands shatters on the ground.

"Oh, *fuck*--" Phil runs outside.

There is no reason for Phil's sense of urgency, but he doesn't know what else to do. He knows Wilbur is already dead.

~

Punz gets Wilbur's body back to the base, and here he stops, annoyed.

Up until this point he'd some how gotten it in his head that he would revive Wilbur and shove him Tommy's way, but he *can't* revive Wilbur. He doesn't have any more fucking copies of the revivebook. So instead, it's just him, a fucked up kid he still feels bad for, and a corpse. Which he *definitely* isn't going to show to Tommy.

Punz sighs irritably, abandoning the corpse in the dome.

He had also brought health potions for a reason.

Punz does a quick assessment of himself for blood.

He should've broken Wilbur's neck. He'd been quick about it, stabbing him through the heart, but it had still been fucking messy. A lot of it was washed away by his swim down, but still. He has a feeling Tommy will recognize the diluted shades of rust on his white hoodie.

Who cares. Tommy will probably assume it's his own.

Punz returns to the dark cell. The wall slides away to reveal Tommy yet again curled up on the floor, this time facing the doorway, his hands go to cover his face just from the dim light of the corridor. Tommy squints. His eye is still fucked up.

"Dream..?" He croaks out hoarsely.

Punz's first impulse is almost disgust. "No," he says sharply. "Can you sit up?" Punz kneels down in front of him, taking the health potions out of his inventory.

Tommy does so, slowly, carefully, watching Punz's hands. "Did you do it?" He asks softly. He doesn't know why Punz is here, but it's not like he knew why he was doing any of this.

Punz freezes. He thinks of Wilbur's body just down the hall. "...What?"

Tommy senses the tension, his shoulders hunching inward, flinching. He's frantic again in an instant, "t-the chickens. Like you said, you *said* you would—"

"Yeah. Oh, right, they're—" Punz relaxes. "They're fine. They're with some of the other animals outside my tower."

Tommy nods slowly, relaxing a hair, considering this. He does feel something like relief, and with it there is still grief. He is still alone. "Okay. I think I believe you."

"Not like I have a reason to lie," Punz mutters. "Here," he offers Tommy a health pot.

Tommy goes to take it before stopping. "Wait," he stares down at his broken hand. He winces. "I gotta... can you help me?"

"With what?" Punz frowns.

"You gotta... Jesus man, use your brain, if I don't set the bones, they'll heal back wrong, and then you've got to rebreak them and fix 'em," Tommy sighs, offering his broken hand to Punz without hesitation.

Punz almost finds that more unsettling. There's clearly a *protocol* here. What, first Dream would hurt him, and Tommy knew afterwards when he intended to heal that he could be trusted?

Punz decides not to think about it. "It's gonna fucking hurt."

"Yeah, I know, shithead, that's why I couldn't do it myself," Tommy scowls.

“You still don’t know how to keep your mouth shut, do you, Tommy?”

Now Tommy pulls his hand back, reproachful. “You don’t make any fucking sense. Did you feel bad for hurting me or not?”

“What makes you say that?” Punz says dryly.

Tommy grudgingly nods, “I guess nothing.” He knows what Punz is capable of. He needs to remember how to be careful around someone other than Dream. There’s every chance that he’ll take the health potions away to punish him for getting mouthy. “Sorry. I just... I know it’s gonna hurt really bad, but can you just please help me? You won’t even need to make a splint if I have the health pot right after—” Tommy sighs, eyes closed for a moment. He’s getting thirsty now too. “I don’t want them to heal back funny because that’ll fuck me up *super* bad but I *tried* to set the bones myself and I just—” Tommy opens his eyes, looking remorseful and desperate. “Please?”

“Yeah, yeah, fine, I will. Do you like... do you want something to bite down on or something?”

Tommy gives him a look before offering his right hand again. “Just do it. I can try not to move. I was more worried I’d black out or some shit. I’ll... I’ll try to give you some warning if I think I’m gonna puke, though. That seems fair.”

Punz frowns, “why would...”

“You’ve never been in so much pain it makes you sick?” Tommy scoffs, almost with an air of superiority.

Punz bites back another irritable comment. He takes Tommy’s hand.

“What’s up with your nails?”

“What?”

“Your... I stepped on your hand, like. I don’t think your fingernails should be ripped up like this,” Punz stares blankly at the blood around his tattered nails.

“You don’t *think*—” Tommy mutters harshly. “You don’t *think they should be*— I’ve been—” Tommy gestures with his free hand furiously to the walls. “You were even— *did you think I would cope well?*” He snarls.

Punz is still not understanding. “Do you... bite your nails..?”

“Do I...” Tommy stares at him, mouth hanging open slightly. “I t-tried to—” Tommy nods toward the open doorway with a hint of desperate longing, even as he makes no move to escape. “T-The early hours— at least I *think* i-it was hours— I tried to get out, okay?! You have no fucking idea how fucking *hard it is* to— w-with the walls closing in a-and—” Tommy stops abruptly, hunching inward, tucking his free arm across his chest defensively, even as he hasn’t pulled away, like by virtue of holding onto Tommy’s hand Punz is more entitled to it than he is. He stares at the floor, furious and almost embarrassed.

“You...” Punz doesn’t know what to say. “You scratched at the obsidian. Okay. Uh. Got it. Makes sense.”

“Makes sense...” Tommy mutters sharply, mockingly, but he says nothing more.

Punz refocuses on his task. He’s reset a dislocated shoulder before, he’s stitched up cuts and so on, but he’s never set a broken finger. How hard can it be?

The last time this had happened, that Dream had set a broken finger, Tommy had blacked out after the first one. He’d had a lot of other things making him weak, so this time Tommy gets no such luxury. Tommy bangs his unbroken fist against the wall behind him, eyes tightly shut, jaw tense as he muffles a whine, Punz setting the first finger.

“I-It’s—*fuck*, ” Tommy catches his breath, strange how pain can act as a blow to the chest, knocking the wind out of him. He tries again. “It’s only... the first three. The thumb, the pinky. Are alright. Just bruised. I think.”

Punz nods. He only stares at Tommy’s broken hand, not his face. He pretends he doesn’t feel uneasy. Another bone he pushes back into place. “This one is lined up right, it’s just fractured,” Punz says. He’s quick to let go.

“Fan-fucking-tastic,” Tommy says hoarsely. “C-Can I still have— Can I have the health pot?” For some reason Tommy is expecting Punz to revoke his offer, like the charity of setting his broken bones counted as already too much. All of this is already too generous. “Please?”

“What about your nose?”

“F-Fixed the nose. I think I fixed it right. Almost blacked out doing it too. I can get a little air in, and I think the rest is from the blood, so I’m hoping once it’s fixed up I’ll be able to breathe again. If not,” Tommy winces. “You’ll have to break it again.”

Punz nods grimly, handing him the bottle, uncorking it first.

“My ribs are... they’re busted up too, I think, but not like you can set a rib without cutting me open,” Tommy downs it, dropping it the moment it’s empty and curling in on himself as it feels like whitehot needles are seeking out his injuries and stabbing them back into place. His broken nose righting itself feels like getting punched again.

Punz glances up in time to see the swelling around Tommy’s eye go down. It’s still bruised, but it’s definitely better than it was. The same goes for all of him. His nose is still crusted with dried blood and the bruise along his jaw has gone from a deep purple to a greenish brown, his fingers are still clearly a little swollen, and the hundreds of tiny scratches all across his chest and arms become thin, scabbed over lines. It must be annoyingly itchy.

“Where’s...” Tommy looks past Punz to the corridor. “Where is he?”

“Not here,” Punz says flatly.

“Does he know you..?” Tommy gestures vaguely to his hand, the fingers still stiff and bruised, but the bones are at least correctly attached.

“No. He doesn’t need to,” Punz says coldly.

“Y-Yeah, *you* can say that, but if he sees I’m healed he might…” Tommy winces. “Have to fix that, yeah?” Tommy stares bitterly down at the empty bottle. “Maybe I shouldn’t have drank it.”

Punz grabs the empty bottle and stands. He doesn’t care if Tommy’s concerns are valid, the word that comes to mind is not *wary* or *scared*, rather *ungrateful*. “Not my problem,” he says gruffly, quick to make his exit, sealing the door behind him, pretending not to notice Tommy looking almost hurt by his hasty exit.

Punz heads toward the dome, starting and going for his sword when he sees a lone figure in a white mask standing in the middle of it.

Dream nudges Wilbur’s body with his boot. “What’s this?”

“Wilbur got smart. I talked him down enough to let me drag him here,” Punz says. Dream looks up at him sharply, but Punz answers before he can protest. “I killed him before we even got close, obviously.”

“Did you search him?” Dream asks.

“Yeah, I fucking searched him, do you think I’m an idiot?” Punz snaps. “He had a knife, dropped it in the community house, and I smashed his comm, dumped it in the Nether. No lodestone, no nothing.”

Dream nods. “Good. And no, I don’t think you’re an *idiot*, Punz,” he chuckles. “We just have to be safe.” Dream crouches down, assessing Wilbur’s corpse, looking at the hole through his chest. “So *defensive*,” Dream says and Punz can’t tell if he’s referring to Punz’s tone or his choice of murder. “Well, I wouldn’t mind catching up with Wilbur. In a little bit. Wanna put him in his cell?”

“You’re not gonna revive him?”

“Not *yet*,” Dream bounces back on his heels, teasing him. “I gotta fix up Tommy a bit first.” Dream moves to go past him into the corridor.

“No need. I already did,” Punz says coolly. He’s prepared for a fight.

“What’d you mean?” Dream stops.

“I mean, you said unless I had health potions, I had to kill him to heal him. So, I got health potions and came back,” Punz turns to face him. He doesn’t want his back to Dream right now.

Dream exhales something like a laugh. It sounds more like a threat. “*Yeah*, but I *told* you that he was supposed to stay locked up *alone* as punishment.”

“Yeah, I know. He was alone all day. I had to go to the Mainlands and back to get the health potions, and Wilbur, obviously, but when I came back, I healed him,” Punz is all but daring

Dream to protest.

“Huh,” Dream keeps his tone mild. “In that case, thanks for cleaning up your mess.”

“You’re welcome.”

“But he doesn’t know you have Wilbur, right?”

“No. No, he doesn’t. I healed him, I left. That’s it,” Punz hates that he still sounds like he’s defending himself.

“Alright. Good. This could be interesting, y’know?” Dream mulls it over. “And now that I don’t have to heal Tommy, I guess we can start here. How about I help you move him?” Dream grabs Wilbur from under the shoulders.

Punz doesn’t say a word and picks up dead weight from his legs.

They dump his body on the cell floor.

“Do you have a way to keep him under control? We wouldn’t want a repeat of last time,” Punz can’t help but act a little petty.

“I mean, you could just grab Tommy. That’ll get him to behave,” Dream laughs. “Nah. I’m trying to think of a fun way we could do this, hm,” Dream remains crouched down beside Wilbur, assessing him.

“A *fun* way?”

“Always so *disapproving*, Punz,” Dream says mockingly. “You’re so *boring* sometimes. We’re only gonna get to make this reveal once, so.”

“Wilbur is *here* because he figured me out, just like I said he would when you fucking *let him go*,” Punz snaps. “I’m not here to have *fun*, Dream.”

“Well, how would *you* do it, then?” Dream stands, treating this conversation as something casual as he anchors a chain to the wall.

“It doesn’t *matter*. As long as they’re both here and contained.”

“Okay, then I can have fun with it, right?” Dream says mildly. He’s trying to push. Punz won’t let his annoyance get the best of him.

Something inside Punz snaps. “I want you to show me how to write the revivebook. I want to see the copies you have hidden away,” Punz says coldly. He’s tired of being dragged along.

Dream pauses for a moment, considering wrapping the chain around a corpse’s wrist before deciding against it. “Huh.”

“That’s it? That’s all you have to say?”

“No,” Dream is still too calm. “Just thinking.”

“The things I’ve done for you, Dream— If it weren’t for me, you wouldn’t have Tommy *or* Wilbur. Actually, you’d be either dead or locked up somewhere, wouldn’t you?” Punz isn’t quite shouting at Dream. For some reason, he doesn’t want Tommy to hear this.

Dream stands. “And without me, you wouldn’t even know immortality was an option, would you?” He says, still irritatingly calm, patronizing, almost. “You’d still be alone in that tower of yours, a mercenary for hire. What were you doing with your earnings? Huh? Get yourself a stack of diamond blocks, a block of Netherite, all of it for *what*, Punz?” Dream steps over Wilbur’s corpse so they’re eye to eye. Eye to mask. “To sit in that tower without a *purpose*. At least these pathetic idiots occupied themselves with desperately trying to take care of each other,” he looks back toward Wilbur, who remains unmoving. “You’ve been useful, sure. But nothing about you is *necessary*, Punz. I could’ve done everything you did, just might’ve been a bit more inconvenient for me. *I* have something you don’t. And you *demanding* it from me isn’t really encouraging me to listen.” Dream pauses, Punz can imagine he’s sizing him up behind that stupid mask. “I think you’ve forgotten your place.”

Punz wants to rip Dream’s mask off and shove it down his throat.

He’s right. Everything Punz had said was also true, Dream would be dead or imprisoned if not for him activating a second stasis right after they tried to pull him back, but none of that changed anything. Dream still held the only card that matters.

Punz gives one curt nod, turning toward Wilbur’s body instead of facing Dream. “What is it you want from them?”

“What’s that?”

“What is it that you want from Wilbur and Tommy? What about them seeing each other again is... *fun*,” Punz buries disgust as well as irritation, arms folded across his chest.

“Hm, you know, I don’t really know,” Dream mulls it over. “I mean, you’ve got to admit the two of them... they’re *interesting*,” he rests his elbow on Punz’s shoulder, looking down at Wilbur’s corpse with him. “I still want to figure out stuff about revival, don’t get me wrong,” he says quickly. “But...” He stares at Wilbur’s unmoving form, at the hole in his chest. “I *also* want to see just how far I can push them. How far *we* can push them,” he puts his arm around Punz’s shoulder, giving it a squeeze. “I’m not afraid to play the long game, I mean, I already know they’d both die and kill for each other, but that’s so *small*.”

“And what... *isn’t* small, then?” Punz asks reluctantly, but he’d be lying if he said some morbid part of himself wasn’t curious.

Dream must be smirking behind that mask. “You’ve got to wonder, y’know?” A laugh half under his breath. “What’d you think they’d do *to* each other? With the right push?”

~

Wilbur's time back in the train station is a bit blurry. Hours in the living world means days here. Wilbur didn't know how to cope. Decades spent alone, maybe he should be used to it, the back and forth of it all when Dream had dragged him around, but after those precious weeks outside, alive, even cared for, Wilbur opens his eyes to the faded white tile of the train station's ceiling and feels like he cannot breathe. He doesn't even *need* to breathe.

"N-No- No, I don't- I can't-" Wilbur doesn't know who he's pleading with. "*I can't!*" Wilbur screams. He staggers to his feet, looking around wildly. He doesn't try the doors. He doesn't claw at the walls. He knows better than that. He knows more than ten years better.

He paces.

"*Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuckfuckfuckfuckfuckfuckfuckfuckfuck-*" Wilbur hits his forehead with his palm at each word. "*FUCK!*" he screams to the walls he knows every corner of, every crack in the tile, every flicker of the sterile, artificial lights.

Wilbur does not try to leave.

He needs to hurt himself.

Wilbur is trembling as he sits against one of the pillars by the tracks, yanking at fistfuls of his own hair. He can hear his own frantic breathing, he can feel the stinging pain of his scalp, he can see *white. fucking. tile.*

Wilbur screams until his voice is raw, until he swears he can taste blood, his ears, his jaw, it all aches next to his vocal chords feeling like an open wound.

It isn't enough.

The train station still burrows under his skin like a parasite, a possession, a violation. He cannot escape it.

However many hours, days, he spends screaming until he bleeds, he doesn't look around, he keeps on staring at the floor, these concrete slabs he has memorized as much as the rest of them, the crack from one pillar to the edge of the platform, the corner of the one below it is stained a different shade of grey, so he doesn't notice the handprints of blue ink clawing at the walls, smearing Tommy's drawings.

"*Wake up.*"

Wilbur blinks away white pillars and opens his eyes to two figures standing over him.

"O-Oh, hi-" Wilbur stammers out the first thing that comes into his head, other than that not moving from his place on the ground.

Punz and Dream exchange a look.

"Mhm. *Hi*, Wilbur," Dream says with dry amusement. "You ready to see Tommy?"

Wilbur is wary now, sitting up on his elbows. “Where is he? Why’re you...” Wilbur doesn’t know what to ask. *Why are you letting me? What’s the catch?*

“Yeah, don’t worry about it,” Dream sighs. “Look, I am going to offer Tommy something. And, you’re going to want him to accept. I know you will, that’s how you two just *are*,” he says it like an insult. “But you’re going to beg him not to. At the very least, you’re gonna keep your fucking mouth shut, because if you don’t–” Dream gestures to Wilbur, as if expecting something. “Come on, Wilbur, it hasn’t been *that* long,” he laughs, teasing. “If you don’t?”

Wilbur glances furtively around the room, struggling to get his bearings, there’s a dining table shoved against the wall, the rest of it is much of what he’s seen before, damp stone brick, dim sea lanterns. Punz has remained distant, arms folded across his chest, expression carefully neutral.

Wilbur swallows thickly. His chest feels strangely taut around the fresh scarring from yet another instance of getting stabbed through the chest. “You’ll hurt Tommy.”

“Knew you’d get there eventually,” Dream pats him on the shoulder and Wilbur scowls, pulling away, struggling to get to his feet on weak and unsteady legs. Dream heads for the exit.

“W-Wait– What’re you... what’re you offering to Tommy?” Wilbur asks weakly.

Dream waves him off, not even bothering to look back. “Not like it matters.”

Wilbur glances at Punz, assessing, briefly, if he might be able to attack the man and get away with it.

Not an option anymore. Tommy is here.

~

Tommy stays curled in a ball. He’s trying to make himself smaller, maybe that way the walls won’t feel so close. If he stays in the very center of the room, on his side, hunched inward, knees tucked into his chest, he doesn’t touch the walls. He can try to pretend there’s more room than there actually is. The lack of broken bones is a relief, but he almost misses the distraction. If he gives himself a goal, it stops him from clawing at the walls, he’d stopped clawing at the walls ages ago, and now his task is to not move. If he doesn’t move, he doesn’t feel like the walls are closing in on him.

Thirst right now is just irritating, but that is made worse knowing what comes next, the point where the thirst will be *painful*. Other than Punz’s visits, he has no sense of how long it’s been or of how long he’ll be kept locked away.

What if it starts raining again? How’s a run through the jungle feel right about now?

Tommy whines, burying his head in his hands, even as that hurts his black eye and his bruised fingers. *Everything* hurts, just because it’s gone from broken bones and open wounds

to bruises and scabs doesn't mean it doesn't fucking *hurt*.

Tommy doesn't know what he's hoping for. Maybe he'll get lucky and be allowed some sleep in his cell, maybe he'll be able to get food and water too.

Fuck.

There is *nothing* to hope for and *nowhere* to go from here. There is no light at the end of the tunnel because there's *only the tunnel*. There is no light, there is no end. He feels too young for all of this, too young to be this tired.

How had he kept hope last time? He'd believed in rescue. *How* had he done that?

Is that what you want, Tommy? To think help is coming? To spend the rest of eternity believing in a lie?

Tommy thinks it might be too late for that. He's gone too far now to fall back on desperate hope. That hope had saved him once.

You were saved because you could reach someone. Wilbur, Ghostbur, Ranboo. Who can you reach now? Punz?

He's a fucking joke.

The wall of obsidian opens. He sits up and this time the room doesn't spin. He squints at the figure outlined in the doorway.

"What now—?" Tommy makes the mistake of assuming it would be Punz. Tommy yelps as Dream grabs him by the hair, dragging him to his feet, Tommy fumbling to hold onto Dream's wrist to stop the pain from being quite so blinding. Tommy is startled, but he certainly isn't surprised. "S-Sorry, I'm sorry, I—"

"Shut up."

Tommy shouldn't have taken the fucking health potion. Now Dream is going to break him again. He's suffered *enough*, he just wants this to end, *why* can't he just *rest*?

Tommy is too focused on keeping standing, on keeping close enough that he doesn't feel like Dream is going to rip his hair out, he doesn't look up until Dream throws him to the ground, Tommy barely managing to stop himself from faceplanting by catching himself on his elbows, which causes a whole different kind of pain to shudder up through him. Tommy turns around, scrambling back, trying to keep Dream in his sights as he waits for another kick to the ribs, or maybe for Dream to hold him down and take out a knife. Dream doesn't move, just folds his arms over his chest, seemingly smug.

"Tommy?!"

Tommy knows that voice. Tommy turns around sharply, he gets a mere glimpse of curly brown and white hair and a tattered trenchcoat before he's throwing himself at his brother.

Maybe he should throw a punch, maybe he should be *furious* with Wilbur for throwing away what Tommy had fought and died– and died *and died and died*– to give to him, but he doesn't.

Tommy clings to Wilbur and buries his face in his stupid coat, a sob caught in his throat as he holds on for dear life, because all he can think is:

Thank god. Thank fucking god I'm not alone please protect me Wilbur please keep me safe I can't do this I can't I can't I just want someone to stop the hurting please make them stop please I just need someone to hug me right now–

Wilbur obliges. He hugs Tommy tightly, already horrified by the mere glimpse of Tommy's battered face and bloodied shirt, the way he trembles, holding on as tightly as he can and even that's too weak to hurt him. Wilbur feels an ache in his chest, a hole opening there that never needed a sword.

You came here to help him. How the fuck are you gonna do that?

"I've got you, Tommy. I've got you," Wilbur murmurs. Tommy cannot bury his sobs any longer with Wilbur holding him, Wilbur blinks back tears and holds his breath as he starts to get choked up. He'd almost forgotten about this part. This time he can't fall to pieces, he's no longer dead, so this won't be like that fucking ravine, he cannot abandon Tommy to this alone. *He* has to be the invincible one now. "I-I've got you..."

"Okay, okay I get it, you're *adorable*," Dream ruins things, as he's wont to do. At the sound of Dream's voice, Wilbur feels Tommy hold on tighter. "Cut it out for a sec, let's talk, okay? And then you can go back to crying in each other's arms or whatever."

"What do you want, Dream?" Wilbur wishes he could kill that man with a glare. *It's two versus two now. No time like the present to revolt, that was always a good plan for you, right?* some irritatingly tempting voice in the back of his head says. He glances down at Tommy, who still hasn't let go. *Right...*

"I'm not talking to *you*, Wilbur. You're a fucking *prop*," Dream scoffs. "Tommy?" He snaps his fingers. He whistles, "come here, Tommy. Turn around, I'm *talking to you*."

"He's not a fucking dog, Dream," Wilbur wishes his rage was worth something, worth anything.

Dream laughs. "Right, just like *you're* not a prop." He looks back to Punz. "D'you mind?"

Punz's expression remains stony, but he gives the slightest of nods.

Punz takes one step toward him and Wilbur tries to get Tommy behind him, but the kid won't budge. All he can do is raise one hand, the other still around Tommy, and try to sound like he's in any way formidable. "Stay back, alright? Just– Just give us a fucking minute, where's the harm in that? Just a *minute*, just–"

Punz grabs Wilbur's extended arm by the wrist, twisting it around behind his back with expert precision. Wilbur staggers. He lets go of Tommy. Dream gets Tommy to release his vice-like grip around Wilbur by dragging him away by his hair.

"*Will!*" Tommy's voice is hoarse as he screams his brother's name, eyes wide and terrified, reaching out towards him helplessly as Dream pulls him away.

"I-It'll be fine, Tommy! It's—" Wilbur struggles against Punz pinning him to the ground, wrists held together, Punz's knee digging into his spine as he tries to look up and keep Tommy in his sights. Tommy who he can finally see properly, he can see the bruises on his face and the dried blood speckled across his chest and crusted from his nose and around his mouth. Someone beat the shit out of his little brother. *Fury* is too small a word for whatever animal is clawing at the inside of his chest now. There's a piece of metal around Tommy's left wrist. That he doesn't understand. Wilbur forces himself to keep talking, to try not to sound hysterical. "I'm here, Tommy, I—"

"Shut up real quick, Wilbur. Just for a minute," Dream says almost lazily, still steering Tommy by holding a fistful of his hair as he forces him to his knees. "Okay, I've got a question for you, Tommy."

Tommy feels so much colder now. He doesn't look at Dream, only at Wilbur on the ground. Until Dream forces him to look away, turning him to face him with a painful tug. "You're listening, aren't you, Tommy?" He asks warningly.

Tommy blinks, like he's awoken from a daze as that white mask fills his vision instead. "Y-Yes," Tommy says softly.

"Good, that's *good*, Tommy," Dream's patronizing praise does not match his vicious grip. "You remember what I said, don't you? You have your free will back! *Yay*." Dream says sarcastically, waving toward Wilbur like he's a present. "So, do you want to go back to the Mainlands?" Dream asks.

Tommy doesn't know what he's supposed to say. He doesn't *understand*.

"Hm?" Dream waits, and still Tommy says nothing, so he continues. "Now, obviously if you go back and tell anyone about Punz, I am going to send you pieces of your brother so shredded you could use him as *confetti*, but other than that, go wild. Move on with your life. I'll have Punz keep you updated on how your *brave* big brother is doing. Just say the word," Dream lets go, instead putting an arm around his shoulder, an unnerving mimicry of encouragement. "We can go *right now*. Think about it, we haven't reset the stasis chamber yet, nothing would bring you back, and the lodestone— well, I'm sure your little buddies could help you figure something out. Although, I wouldn't mind if you kept that, just in case— But anyway, I *know* Tubbo has been missing you," Dream pats his arm. "So, what'd you say?"

"I don't..." Tommy says, voice barely above a whisper, his mind in a tailspin as he tries to find some reasonable thought to cling to in this fucking mess.

“I’m not kidding. You *know* I’m not. I’m not *lying*. I have Wilbur now, and I told you once he’s back he’s your free will!” Dream looks over at Wilbur, still pinned to the floor. Punz keeps him on the ground, but other than that, he’s mostly doing his best to ignore everything that’s being said.

Wilbur understands now. He’s supposed to beg Tommy to stay. He’s supposed to make this more painful for him. But Wilbur would fucking *never*, just as he knows Tommy wouldn’t want to leave him.

Wilbur stares at Tommy, who doesn’t look defensive, or even wary. He looks like he’s thinking very hard.

He knows Tommy wouldn’t want to leave him.

What the fuck was he thinking— of *course* Tommy should want to leave him. Where the fuck did Wilbur get this ego? He’s hurt his brother enough, and he has the audacity to assume Tommy would choose this hell with him?

Tommy is *so* fucking tired. He’s tired of being scared, of starving and running and being fucking *helpless* while Dream takes everything from him over and over again.

He wants to go home.

He looks at Wilbur, who hasn’t said a word, and he knows Wilbur would let him go. Wilbur is *pleading* with him, begging with a look not that he stay, but that he get the hell out of here.

It’s what Wilbur wants. It’s what Tommy wants. Hell, it might even be what *Dream* wants if he finds it interesting enough.

“I’m gonna... I’m gonna stay here,” Tommy doesn’t look at any of them. He stares at the water on the floor, not enough to reflect anything but the faint shimmer of sea lanterns, but Tommy can imagine his own reflection. “I’m gonna stay here with Wilbur,” Tommy repeats a little louder, a little more sure. Silence presses in. Wilbur feels disappointed, but he can’t help that little spark of relief alongside it.

“Okay,” Dream shrugs. “Fine. Like I said, your choice. You’re gonna stay here, but...” He chuckles. “Not with *Wilbur*,” he says it like Tommy is being ridiculous. “Maybe some other time, like, I’m not gonna keep you two apart all the time, but right now— why the fuck would I just let you two *hang out*?”

Tommy isn’t surprised. He’s glad he’d hugged Wilbur immediately. Maybe he should say something. He doesn’t know what to say.

“That’s not— No, h-he agreed to stay, shouldn’t that mean—” Wilbur, for his part, at least tries. Maybe he should know better than to try to reason for mercy. Punz drags him to his feet, keeping his arms pinned back. “Tommy, I’m sorry, I—”

“Aw, come on, Wilbur. I forgot how pathetic you got when Tommy was actually around! At least when it’s just *you* you’ve got a little fire in you,” Dream cuts him off mockingly.

“Alright, I’m gonna go help Tommy set up his stasis again, and once I’m done, you do the same with Wilbur, right?”

Punz nods.

“Cool, thank you, Punz!” Dream is horribly cheerful. He grabs Tommy’s arm, pulling him toward the corridor.

Tommy resists for just a moment, turning back to look at his brother. “W-Wil–” He’s cut off by sharp pain ringing through his head as Dream hits him.

“Get the fuck away from him–” Wilbur snarls, struggling against Punz’s hold.

Dream just talks right over him, “did I *say* you could say goodbye, Tommy?”

Tommy shakes his head, cheek stinging, jaw aching. He doesn’t say another word.

“Let go of me– Just–” Wilbur doesn’t know why he’s struggling. Or why he’s begging. He can’t believe for a brief moment he thought he’d be able to *protect* Tommy. That’s a fucking joke.

Tommy lets Dream drag him back into the corridor, only brave enough to look at Wilbur with a silent pleading before he’s out of sight.

“Wilbur, I will knock you out. Quit fighting. What’re you gonna do for him, huh? Try and fight Dream? What, so Dream can kick your ass and then hurt Tommy just to make you pay for it?” Punz is still handling him easily, the struggling merely irritating as he slams Wilbur against the wall, keeping his arms twisted upward and pinned between his shoulder blades.

"You're a sick fucking bastard– The both of you, what the fuck happened to him?! H-His face– He was all bloody–"

"What do you think, Wilbur? Do you really need to ask that?" Punz is sharp, almost defensive.

Wilbur huffs wordlessly, forehead pressed to the cool stone, eyes closed. He stops fighting. “What was... What was that on Tommy’s wrist?”

There’s a pause, and Wilbur assumes Punz isn’t going to answer him, then: “Why does it matter?”

Wilbur considers this gloomily. He’s been alive again for maybe a half hour and he feels drained. Still, he asks, voice quieter in his weariness. “...does it hurt him?”

Another pause. “It’s...” Punz hesitates. “It’s a lodestone. And...” he pulls Wilbur away from the wall now that he’s stopped fighting. “I don’t think so.” Punz refuses to look Wilbur in the eye. “Not anymore.”

Chapter End Notes

Aha crimeboys~

Yay.

Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

CW: referenced suicide, violence, temporary character death, dehumanization. The usual.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tubbo is going to Tommy's house.

He'd avoided it thus far, and after Niki he'd avoided it still, but then he had this terrible, miserable realization as he continued his tireless, desperate planning for a rescue.

He isn't angry with Tommy anymore.

And if you're not angry with him, it means you're not getting him back.

So maybe what he is seeking out is that anger, something to make him feel stronger as that wound in his heart settles in and scabs over.

Tubbo walks down the prime path, staring at the wood, half expecting a trip wire to show up, but the paths have remained clear so far.

It's straying from the path that's most punished.

Tubbo has to jump to get over the remaining pit from what happened to Niki. The blood is mostly gone by now. The pit just extended enough to destroy the threshold, the interior of Tommy's home is mostly intact.

Tubbo hasn't been here in a long time.

Tommy had left it made of dirt. Tubbo doesn't know if that means it was the state he liked it best in or if he'd wanted it to be left a clean slate. Tubbo stands on the crafting table floors, staring at the dusty chests and the quiet and the *nothingness* of it and he searches for his anger.

"I don't understand, really... how did..." Tubbo doesn't know who he's talking to or what he's pleading for. "Surely not..." He knows he can say that as many times as he likes, but it won't change anything.

Tubbo knows Tommy's house probably better than he knows his own— wherever he can call his house nowadays— so he sees it immediately. There is a chest in the back room at the foot of the bed that has never been there before.

Tubbo feels dread, he feels it like a cold shock of fear piercing enough he almost wants to run away.

It's not that he fears it is a trap laid by Dream, rather the opposite.

He doesn't want know what Tommy decided to leave behind for Tubbo to find, but he's so tired of waiting for something to happen. He opens the chest.

A single book. He picks it up, on its cover:

To Tubbo

Tubbo feels that anger simmering back to life, and for a moment he's torn between throwing the stupid thing across the room and opening it.

He goes with the latter.

I do want to start off

Just that glimpse of Tommy's fucking handwriting and he snaps the book shut. Tubbo feels like he's going to be swallowed whole by the grief in his chest. But it cannot be grief. It's supposed to be anger. *Why the fuck isn't it just anger?*

Tubbo opens the book.

I do want to start off saying im sorry. I know that will just piss you off more but i cant not say it you know? There's other bullshit I want to say like 'oh it wasnt about you and you couldnt have stopped me' but I know that's not what u want to hear.

I mean u don't want to hear any of this, do you?

Tubbo isn't crying. He feels oddly empty, floating inches away from his own body and his own pain.

So, Im still gonna give you what I can. To try and make this a little easier. I don't think I could've ever lived and been happy or okay knowing Wilbur was still out there getting hurt. Even if we caught Dream that didn't mean Wilbur would be okay. He'd still be alone. He'd still die and be in hell and that's the good scenario.

And im sorry that still fucking sucks for you. Im not saying I couldnt be happy with you, okay? It's more complicated than that and I hope you know that.

So. I know I can't stop you from worrying about me. Quite right to if im being honest. But don't worry yourself too much, okay? I'll be alright. I'll be with Wilbur. I'll be as alright as I can be.

Tubbo rereads that line. *I'll be with Wilbur.* Now his anger returns, but it's not toward Tommy.

Tommy is *alone*.

All of those efforts to get Wilbur back, to get *to* Wilbur, and now Tommy is the one abandoned and Wilbur is here as a cruel reminder.

<Ph1LzA> Wilbur is gone.

<Quackity> what do you mean gone?

<Ph1LzA> as in Ghostbur is here

<The_Eret> What?? How

<Ph1LzA> help me find his body.

<Ph1LzA> please

Tubbo stares at his comm.

“That’s not—” his voice breaks. “That’s not fucking *fair*, I—” Tubbo stands, and stows the book in his inventory. Apparently he has more pressing matters to take care of.

~

The stasis chambers set, Tommy is not locked away in that tiny room of obsidian, instead he’s thrown into his usual cell. Tommy goes immediately to the sink and drinks. He then begins to wash away blood. It’s perhaps too easy a habit, to take care of what he can for whatever little time he has. His nose healed right, he can breathe through it relatively well and it’s a relief to get the blood off of his face. He washes away the flecks of blood from the scratch marks, unable to resist itching at them, annoyed with himself as this reopens some of the wounds. He knows it will take longer to heal the worse he makes it which means it will itch for *longer*. Tommy balls his hands into fists, forcing himself to stop, even as it makes his newly healed knuckles ache.

He turns back toward his bed, and feels an ounce of relief as he falls onto it. A new shirt is also laid out on it. Tommy would’ve preferred something a little warmer, and can’t help but envy Wilbur’s bloody jacket, but it’s long sleeved and a plain grey instead of a mess of bloodied stains. Definitely an improvement. The thin cot isn’t exactly comfortable and there’s still that damp chill to the air that a blanket cannot fix, but he wants to fucking *rest*. He feels like he could sleep for a week.

He hears the distant click of redstone and bolts upright, but his door does not open.

Right. Wilbur is right fucking next door.

Tommy doesn’t speak yet, he waits and listens. He hears the mechanism again, the door locking. He waits longer still.

It’s faint, a bit muffled, but he *can* hear Wilbur far too clearly for a block of stone between them.

“...gonna fucking do?! You can’t... I mean, what, you’re here now, dickhead, and now what... you never said fucking goodbye and he was your dad, you’re never gonna see your dad again, but you already knew that didn’t you–”

“W-Wil?” Tommy calls carefully, glancing back to the door, but no one comes running to punish him for speaking.

“T-Tommy?!” Wilbur’s confused tone follows. “You’re... where the fuck are you?”

“Next door,” Tommy goes to the back wall of the cell, wagering a guess. He holds his hand up to the corner between wall and ceiling and feels airflow. “There’s like, vents or something so we don’t suffocate.”

“And I can hear you. Huh,” Wilbur doesn’t seem to know what to make of it.

“You...” Tommy clears his throat, already getting choked up. It’s just Wilbur’s *voice*, he can’t seriously be about to break down over the sound of Wilbur’s *voice*– “You’re here.”

“Yeah... Yeah, sort of, I’m so sorry, Tommy, I wish I–”

“Shut up for a sec,” Tommy gets closer to the wall, the ceiling already incredibly low, but since the thin crack is at the very top of the ceiling, his forehead stops him from really being able to see through it, even still, it just looks like pitch black darkness from what he can tell. He listens. There is nothing. “...hey, I told you shit about the disc war, right? Back in the early days?”

“What?” Wilbur is baffled for a moment.

“Yeah. You remember,” Tommy considers keeping it vague, but it probably doesn’t matter anyway. “Dream hid in the walls to look for the discs,” Tommy tenses, listening again, as if expecting Dream to congratulate or kill him. Still, nothing.

“Oh– *Oh*,” Wilbur catches on. There’s a weighted silence. “...you ever heard of a panopticon, Tommy?”

“Oh, you’re just making up words now–”

“No, no really, there’s–” Wilbur pauses, following the sound of Tommy’s voice until he too can feel the thin line into some black space beyond where they got their air from. It could be a vent too small for a person to even crawl through. It could be a room someone could be sitting in right now. And there is no way for him to know. “It’s a prison design, see? So, you got the courtyard in the middle, and the whole thing, all the cells, are in a big circle, and in the middle there’s a guard tower. And it’s for like, it’s for a *big* prison, so. They cannot have enough guards to watch all the prisoners at once. But the prisoners know the tower is there, but the lights are too bright for them to see the guards, so. They can never tell when the guards are watching them–”

“So they’ve got to assume the guards are always watching ‘em, I get it,” Tommy says gruffly. He and Wilbur stand in perfect mirror to one another, both standing in the corner as

close to their shared wall as possible, both trying to see past that thin line into the dark.

“Yeah.”

Silence, neither of them wanting to speak now. There’s very little either of them could say that would actually give Dream some advantage. He already *has* every fucking advantage. And there isn’t really a reason to pretend not to be vulnerable to one another, Dream is already fantastically aware of their codependency. Still, they don’t want to give him anything more.

Still, they speak in the same moment.

“You okay—?”

“I missed you—”

Silence.

“Why’d you...” Tommy sighs, pressing his forehead against the cool stone, wishing he could melt through it and just hug his brother again. “Why’d you come back here, Wil?”

A pause. Tommy thinks he hears Wilbur laugh.

“I can’t believe you’re asking me that... *how* can you ask me that?”

“Come on, Wil. You can’t have expected you could just like... show up and rescue me or whatever the fuck,” Tommy stares at the ground. Then at the wall. He doesn’t like looking at himself. He feels this awful yearning in his chest, that cruel impulse telling him that he *needs* Wilbur.

“What about you? He said you could go, Tommy. You literally had a way out of here and you said *no*.”

“Same deal, I guess,” Tommy says dryly. “Like, I wasn’t surviving out there. Without you a- and knowing he was hurting you. You heard what he said, Punz would keep me *updated*,” Tommy shudders. “I don’t want more pieces of you, Wil.” A pause. “I know you wanted me to accept. You didn’t say it, but when I said I’d stay you looked disappointed.”

Wilbur laughs, bitterly now. “Dream gave me a little pre-game pep talk. He wanted me to... he wanted me to beg you to stay. And he said he’d hurt you if I told you to run so I didn’t say anything, for all I knew he would’ve taken back the offer... the offer which I don’t fucking understand, by the way. Why would he let you go? He made it quite clear to me I’m worthless without you.”

Tommy feels sick. “C-Can we stop? Can we stop talking about *him*?”

A pause. “...yeah, yeah sure, Tommy.”

“A-And you never answered me., Wil. Why the fuck did you— why are you *here*? This isn’t gonna get us out of here.”

“Not— Obviously, no, it’s just—” Wilbur pauses, and it’s like Tommy can hear him overthinking. “...I didn’t want you to be alone.”

Tommy nods, not thinking about how Wilbur can’t see him. Tommy’s vision blurs with tears, but he still doesn’t hate Wilbur for doing this, for throwing away his freedom— how could he? He did the very same— instead there is only this exhausted, heavy relief. Tommy feels weak, knees giving out so instead he is on the ground, his hollow chest racked with sobs.

“Tommy?!” Wilbur sounds so frantic, so *worried* for him.

“T-Thanks,” Tommy chokes out.

Wilbur turns around, his back to the wall as he slides to the floor, a hand running through his hair as yet again he is overcome by his own fucking helplessness. He can hear his brother breaking down and can do nothing to comfort him and it’s like an animal clawing at the inside of his chest as he’s overcome by want to just *help him*. Why can’t he fucking help him?! Telling Tommy, *of course I’m here. Nothing matters to me more than you*, doesn’t do anything more to actually get him out of this mess than him useless on the other side of a brick wall. So he doesn’t say it.

“Yeah...” Wilbur stares at the wall across from him. He wonders how long it will take for him to memorize the cracks in the brick here as he had in limbo. “Don’t mention it.”

~

Maybe Tubbo should see Ghostbur and feel distraught, feel the immediate loss and dread Phil had experienced, but instead there is this morbid, piercing moment of desperate hope. Maybe Wilbur had gone through with his plan alone. Maybe there’s a *chance* Ghostbur knows something.

Phil and Tubbo are both on one life. They grudgingly stay behind while the others search for Wilbur’s body. It’s a bit easier for them to stay put with their current company being so captivating.

“How have you been, Tubbo? I haven’t seen you in a while!” Ghostbur says brightly, staring from Phil to Tubbo in mild confusion, they both stare at him for what he is, a ghost come back to haunt them.

“Ghostbur, what do you remember about the past months?” Tubbo asks.

“Oh, I don’t know, really,” Ghostbur shrugs. “I mean, I sort of remember talking to Tommy? Out in that pretty valley in the desert with the red sand! And then I went home, and then...” He frowns, puzzled. “I think I must have gotten very sad for a while. Because I can’t remember much after that. And then I came back! And now I’m here.”

“You don’t... you don’t remember any of it?” Tubbo pushes. Tommy had said they’d made Limbo a better place so he would remember.

“Well, I’d rather not think about it,” Ghostbur at least looks apologetic.

“Ghostbur, this is *very, very* important,” Phil’s tone is gentle and a bit hoarse. “Anything you remember at all, alright, mate?”

Ghostbur nods, considering it. “Well, it was that same place where I got the numbers. And at first it was okay! There were lots of books there. And Tommy said it was a safe place and I’d be home soon!” He falters, voice softening, that echo becoming more pronounced. “B- But I wasn’t home soon. I wasn’t home for a very long time and I think that’s when I got sad...”

“And you never saw Tommy? In all that time? More recently. It would’ve been more recent,” Tubbo pushes.

Ghostbur shakes his head. “I’m sorry, Tubbo. I think I would remember seeing Tommy! I think I missed him, actually. Where is he now? I’d like to see him.”

Tubbo and Phil do not exchange a look, it’s an understanding shared beyond them, a mutual pain. Neither of them know what to say.

Phil tries. “I know you sort of have Wil’s memories as well, don’t you?” Phil asks. “Do you remember what...” Phil stops himself. He doesn’t know how to say it.

“Ghostbur, what’s the last Alivebur memory you have?” Tubbo asks on his behalf.

“Oh! That’s a funny sort of question,” Ghostbur is thoughtful again. “Well, sorry, Phil, but the last Alivebur memory I have was you stabbing me in the chest.”

“R-Really?” Phil falters, pained. “Not– Not when he... w-when he finally came home, or... or when we tried to help him–” Phil cuts himself off, getting choked up.

Ghostbur shakes his head. “No, sorry, Phil. I don’t think Alivebur was happy very much since he was brought back again.”

“R-Right,” Phil stands, leaving the room before this breaks him.

Tubbo is torn. Maybe Phil needs his comfort right now, but he wants to push Ghostbur for more information even though it’s becoming far too clear he has none to give.

And Tommy’s letter is still burning a hole in his pocket.

So he stands, and goes to the Enderchest Phil has in the corner, and places the book inside.

He’ll read it another day.

Or maybe he won’t, because they’ll bring Tommy home.

Ghostbur is functionally useless. He cannot explain to him anything about the situation they are in because he will definitely forget. The best he can do is a gentle lie.

“Ghostbur, you can’t die, right?”

“Well, I guess when Revivebur is here, I *kind of* die, but yeah! I can’t be killed I don’t think. Maybe by the rain, but I’m not really sure,” Ghostbur muses.

“Okay, good. See, someone has planted TNT all over the server, a... a prank gone too far, see? Do you think you could maybe run around looking for traps? Because blowing up won’t hurt you, right?”

“Nope!” Ghostbur says cheerfully. “I can’t really get blown up! Not permanently at least. So, if that’ll help you, Tubbo, sure!”

“Thank you, Ghostbur. Phil and I are going to stay here, alright?”

“Alright!” Ghostbur drifts off.

Phil watches him leave with exhaustion, glancing over as Tubbo joins him on the platform. “Why’d you send him away?”

“Because he doesn’t know anything, Phil.”

Phil nods wearily. “I can’t fucking believe I let him walk away.”

“I mean,” Tubbo has been trying to ignore the fresh knife in his chest, but that grows harder standing here. “I stopped you. I never should have stopped you.”

“I could’ve gone anyway, Tubbo, you don’t get credit for this,” Phil turns scolding.

“And you would have,” Tubbo is unyielding. “If I hadn’t told you not to.”

Phil sighs. “Not like it matters much now. And I mean...” Phil laughs bitterly. “I never was much good at stopping Wilbur from killing himself. The opposite, in fact.”

“Wilbur wasn’t easily dissuaded,” Tubbo shrugs. “Not like it matters much now.”

“Yeah. I guess it doesn’t.”

Techno and Ranboo return with their findings.

“That’s mine. That’s one of mine,” Phil says sharply when Ranboo presents the knife flecked with blood to him. Phil steps back as if burned, the implications alone make him only think of a sword in his hands and in Wilbur’s chest. “Jesus christ, Wil– He took it–”

“There wasn’t any more blood than that, Phil,” Techno cuts in firmly. “Wilbur’s body wasn’t there. He didn’t kill himself with it, alright? Promise.”

Phil seems to pull himself back from some brink. “S-So–” He nods. “Okay. Dream took him, and Wilbur tried to defend himself. Okay.” It’s strange to think his son being taken against his will and murdered would be a *comfort*, but it sits easier on the mind than the alternative.

“Looks like it,” Ranboo says softly. “No one has found a body, and because of this, yeah. Yeah, Dream must’ve gotten to him.”

Tubbo doesn’t say it aloud. But there *is* a strange moment of comfort, of relief. Tommy isn’t alone. It also means he cannot find it within himself to resent Wilbur for being the one who made it out, because that’s no longer true.

“That’s the both of them gone, then,” Tubbo says instead. “So we keep trying, yeah? W-We keep making potions, and Sapnap keeps leading the search parties and we—” Tubbo swallows thickly, burying any emotion from his tone. “And we find them. Yeah?”

No one replies. Not properly. A few nods, but that’s not agreement, just like Tubbo doesn’t believe a word out of his own mouth.

But the truth of the matter remains— what else can they do? *Stop?*

Not an option.

~

Tommy sleeps better than the dead. Wilbur can only try to help with mere words for so long and eventually Tommy curls up with that blanket around his shoulders and sleeps. He knows he shouldn’t, but he somehow takes solace in Wilbur being on the other side of that wall. It makes him feel safer, however thin the illusion may be. He still wakes with a start like a firework has gone off when redstone clicks and a door opens. It’s not his door.

“The fuck do you want?” Wilbur snaps. “What, you’re gonna *kill* me? How fucking original—” Wilbur cuts himself off with a yelp. “You fucking bastard—” voice now breathless, and then choked, and then silence.

“Wil?!” Tommy sits up, shouting at the walls. “Wilbur?!”

His own door opens.

“He’s dead, obviously,” Dream says dryly.

“W-What do you want?” Tommy stands, hands balled into fists.

“Hm,” Dream exhales a soft laugh. “It’s raining, Tommy.”

Tommy falters. “Oh. A-And Wilbur—”

“He doesn’t have a lodestone yet, sure, but I still have the stasis set up. I’m not going to waste a good opportunity,” Dream steps closer.

“Can we— I am so fucking tired, after the past few days, after everything— I am *done*, man, I am so fucking done, I just want to fucking rest a-and I haven’t eaten in who fucking knows how long—” Tommy steps back until he hits the wall behind him, but he has nowhere to go as Dream comes closer.

“What’re you even trying to *do*, Tommy?” Dream almost sounds puzzled. “Bargain? Act like you have a say? After all this time, you’re *still* looking for ways to fight me,” he tuts him. “Come here. If you come here, I’ll just snap your neck. Quick and clean, right?” He motions him over.

Tommy doesn’t move. He doesn’t want to fucking do this. Wilbur is in the next room, or rather, his body might be as he’s now dead.

You can hug Wilbur again if you’re dead.

Tommy is about to step forward, but apparently he took too long to make up his mind. Dream doesn’t snap his neck, he grabs Tommy’s skull and slams it back into the brick. Once is enough that Tommy is left blinded by pain, hot blood from his cracked skull ruining his new shirt, but he’s not dead yet. So Dream pulls him away from the wall and once more bashes his skull in against stone.

There have been worse deaths. Still, Tommy would’ve preferred the broken neck.

“Wilbur?!” Tommy focuses on Wilbur’s Limbo the moment he’s cognizant. The two of them are best at this when together and soon he can see the lights of the train station, standing on stable ground.

“Tommy!” Wilbur is there. Tommy runs to meet him, yet again throwing his arms around his brother’s shoulders and holding on for dear life or death. Yet again it seems they’ve returned to a life where they can only hug each other while dead.

They stay like that for a while, finally uninterrupted, but Tommy also knows this time is valuable.

He pulls back, “okay, when we get revived, if what’s gonna happen is what I think is gonna happen, then—”

“Wait,” Wilbur stops him, grabbing Tommy’s left hand. “It *stays*?!”

Tommy frowns down at the metal around his left wrist. “W-Well I got it off last time, I guess when Dream... made it worse in the living world it came back,” Tommy shakes his head. “But that doesn't matter right now, Wil, when we come back—”

“*Doesn’t matter?* Tommy, look what he fucking did to you! He— There’s a fucking *lodestone* in there, so he can fucking follow you and—”

“I fucking know that, Wil. Do you think I don’t?!” Tommy snaps. “I was there when he fucking welded it shut onto my wrist. Next time you see Dream, take a fucking look at the compass he has clipped to his belt! I fucking *know*. What, did you expect him to go easy on me the second time around? *No*. And it’s only going to get worse and you *chose to fucking come here in it with me*. So, how about you listen to me, eh? You should know better, look at your hand, look at your fucking ear— It was either *this*,” he holds up his left wrist, “or he was going to cut me open and put it next to my spine, so it’s the little things, alright?”

Wilbur falters, trying to read his brother's face for some indication of horror, but he just looks resigned. "Tommy... I am so sorry, I just--"

"Quit saying you're sorry, because what comes next is gonna fucking suck too--"

And suddenly Wilbur is gone. And Tommy is alone for only a moment. And then he's back under the trees staring up at a white mask.

~

Punz has been in a bit of a haze lately. His protestations have led nowhere, so now he has decided to simply do his job.

At least until a better opportunity arises.

Still, he can't help but raise a few more questions here as he drags Wilbur's body up onto the beach.

"And when exactly are you going to explain what we're doing up here?" He asks as Dream emerges with Tommy.

"Once we get there, but it'll be fun, promise," Dream says.

Punz doubts that.

"Watch your step, though. Actually, I might show you a map before we..." Dream mulls something over. "Later, let's just get there first."

Punz stops protesting, grimly throwing Wilbur over his shoulder and following Dream into the jungle.

"Now are you going to explain? Shouldn't you tell me what's going on before you revive them?"

"No, actually. Trust me it'll be more fun this way," Dream shrugs. "Do you have a crossbow?"

Punz gives him a cautious look. "Yeah?"

"Good, it'll be useful."

Punz resigns himself to moody silence, not bothering to reply as Dream hands him a revive book for Wilbur. They bring both of them back together. Punz opens the book, he focuses, that's all. Dream leans over Tommy, opens his book, and like a commandment says "*wake up.*"

Punz has heard him say that before. He doesn't know why Dream says it every time, so it's become almost ritual, but he doesn't understand a lot of things about Dream as of late.

Tommy focuses up first, scrambling back to put some distance between himself and Dream, before he looks for Wilbur.

Wilbur's return is more groggy, shocked back into awareness by Tommy grabbing his arm and dragging them both to their feet, glancing between Punz and Dream warily.

"Welcome!" Dream claps. "Now, Tommy, we've done this little game quite a few times now, but I think this'll *shake things up a bit*, right? Now it's two versus two! Maybe it'll give you and Wilbur a fighting chance to get away, right?"

Tommy focuses on Dream, looking grim. "Same stakes?"

Dream tilts his head, considering this. "More or less."

"Head start?"

"Hm. 30 seconds."

Tommy nods. "Right, Wil— We're gonna fucking run, alright?" He pulls on his brother's arm, heading for the clearest path through the treeline.

"We're—" Wilbur seems like he's still fighting to get his bearings. "We're going to *what*?"

"Run," Tommy glances back to Dream, weary and almost numbed. "And they're going to try to catch us."

"They're— they're letting us go?" Wilbur is all the more bewildered.

Tommy scowls. "Something like that. Just stay close to me, alright?"

Wilbur finally realizes he is way out of his depth here, and the smart thing to do is exactly as Tommy says.

And suddenly, Punz is watching their two prisoners take off into the wilderness.

"Do you want to tell me what the fuck going on?!"

Dream looks over at him. "Thought it would be self explanatory."

Punz's impulsive reply is so useless, but it's all he can think to say, stepping forward and pressing an accusing finger to Dream's chest. "This has *nothing* to do with the revivebook."

"No, it is fun, though," Dream shrugs. He gets out his crossbow, checking the loaded bolt. "Here," he passes Punz a map. "We still have about ten seconds until we go, but you might want to look at this."

"What is this?" Punz stares down at the map of the surrounding area, X marks scattered throughout.

"Like I said," Dream laughs. "*Watch your step*. You go get Wilbur. I'll focus on Tommy."

Punz still hesitates, glancing from the map back up to Dream doubtfully.

“Come on,” Dream sighs, “think about it! He owes you a kill. You took his first two lives, and he stole the last one from you. It should’ve been your right to take the third.”

“*My right—?*” Punz says sharply. Yet again he is forced to look at Dream with a different, more cautious understanding. “...is that what you think about Tommy?”

Dream pauses, and Punz can imagine he looks smug behind that stupid mask. “Well, I mean obviously I got his first two lives, and technically what took his last life was an accident. That I caused,” he laughs. “That’s good enough for me. Either way, I think the hundred or so times I directly killed him afterwards probably makes up for it.”

Punz keeps his expression as neutral as he can manage. “...right.”

“And sure, you got to kill him to bring him here, but I think him stealing that last death... well, I bet he owes you a little more than that,” Dream glances at his comm, where he’s watched the seconds tick by. “Okay. Just shout if you get... *stuck* anywhere.”

And with that, Dream heads off into the treeline, Punz quick to follow as much like Wilbur, he realizes he is wildly out of his depth.

Chapter End Notes

I did like no editing take pity on me okay it's very late and I wanted to post this lol

Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

CW: violence, dehumanization, hunting people for sport, idk man. psychological warfare? you know how it goes.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Maybe not consciously, but since Wilbur's arrival, Tommy has been strategizing. His mission statement torn between not giving Dream what he wants and doing whatever he can manage to keep that monster satiated.

Right now, he's not sure which policy he is upholding.

He knows his grip on Wilbur's wrist is probably tight enough to hurt, he knows any weaker he *will* let go and his brother is a stumbling mess who *will* faceplant the moment he does.

"T-Tommy—" Wilbur wheezes for maybe the fourth time since they've taken off. "J-Just tell me what—"

"You know, if you quit smoking you could probably bitch more coherently to me right now," Tommy says shortly, turning sharply and heading downhill. It always starts somewhere different, but it's the same jungle. Eventually Tommy finds the chokepoints and knows to avoid them, he remembers where things get denser. Normally denser jungle was better. Even if Tommy got a little shredded, he had an easier time fitting through narrow gaps and under branches than Dream did. Normally. Right now he had a noisy, clumsy cohort running— *is he even fucking running?* It almost feels like Wilbur is actually trying to pull him back but that might just be because he's that slow— behind him and he definitely can't slip through the jungle with ease.

"Tommy—" Wilbur gasps and he is no longer lagging behind Tommy, instead he smacks into Tommy's shoulder, sending them both down the rest of the slope, Tommy catching himself on a tree with routine ease, Wilbur *not* doing that and landing in a heap with bloodied palms, a good layer of mud, and probably something damaged in his wrists.

Tommy grumbles under his breath, grabbing Wilbur by the collar of his jacket and pulling him along, finding a spot that wasn't ideal compared to other hiding places, but it's big enough for both of them, so he basically drops Wilbur into the hollow divot behind a wide tree, squishing in beside him. Punz and Dream could run past them, and if they look back they'll spot them immediately, but *only* if they look back.

Wilbur is still trying to catch his breath, shaky from his fall, and his wheezing still audible.

"Can you breathe *any louder?*" Tommy hisses.

Wilbur puts a hand over his mouth, but it's all he can manage as he tries to steady his breathing. The dampness in the air makes it all the harder.

"W-Why did- Dream let us go, why the fuck would he let us go-" Wilbur whispers frantically the moment he's capable of coherent speech.

"He-" Tommy cuts himself off when he hears a distant branch snap. He slaps his hand over Wilbur's mouth because he's still breathing *too fucking loud*.

Wilbur's mind is in a tailspin. *Why the fuck is Tommy treating this like it's routine?* The answer is obvious, he knows, but he can't stand it. Tommy remains silent, so Wilbur does too.

Tommy scans the treeline, but there's nothing.

"Alright, no time to explain shit, just run until I tell you to stop, got it?"

Wilbur barely gets the chance to nod before Tommy is pulling him back to his feet. Tommy starts running, pulling Wilbur behind him. He doesn't let go of his hand, even as it slows him down, as it makes him clumsier, makes *all* of this harder, because he knows if he doesn't Wilbur will not catch up.

He remembers. He remembers Schlatt's deranged and piercing voice, he remembers running and making it to the river and he was halfway across when Wilbur went down behind him and he didn't get back up.

This time, he doesn't let go of Wilbur's hand.

Wilbur starts slowing down before Tommy does, which is almost ridiculous considering Wilbur has had consistent access to food- not necessarily that he had consistently eaten it- and he still had his fucking shoes, and he's *still* slowing down.

Maybe Tommy shouldn't want to *win*, he knows actual escape is a pipe dream, but it's not just the thought of being allowed food, of going unpunished, returning to the base from something as painless as a stasis chamber instead of an axe, but really he wants to win just to know he could. And if he wins, he wants Wilbur to come with him.

It's a feeble version of his usual routine. Run as fast as he can for about ten minutes, or however long it takes for his breathlessness to make his vision go fuzzy and for his limbs to stop obeying him properly, then find somewhere to pause and catch his breath and see if Dream is close behind.

Tommy is only a little breathless, he's still functional, but he still stops again, dragging Wilbur into the first thicket he sees. Thankfully, Tommy learned quickly which plants had thorns and which were just a bit of a risk of bugs. Thus far in the rain bugs hadn't been as much of an issue, but Tommy probably would've preferred thorns to bugs. Still, he and Wilbur are relatively covered by vines.

Tommy gives himself maybe a minute to breathe, and then he's explaining. "Okay, Wil. You wanna know why he let us go?"

Wilbur nods, his own breathing the sort of hoarse wheezing that almost makes Tommy concerned for his health, a miniscule issue in the grand scheme of things.

"Because it doesn't *matter*, alright? He doesn't actually think we have a fucking chance. This is nothing but a game to him. Just like all the rest of it," Tommy's voice is hushed and emphatic, he pauses to listen, scanning the treeline. Nothing. He's been trying to figure out how to use the parrots to his advantage, but Dream hadn't been shouting so far, so it's not like he can even try.

"S-So why... why are we running?" Wilbur asks.

Tommy glances at him doubtfully. "Because he's not exactly going to give you a participation trophy if he finds us. And if he has to use the stasis to get you back, he'll let you eat, says he'll leave you alone. Haven't fucking made it that far yet, but Dream has been having a lot of fun fucking around with the truth instead of flat out lying, so I do believe him," Tommy admits. He's eager to get moving again, but Wilbur still looks like shit.

Wilbur nods to show he understands but words are still a bit of a challenge for him. He hasn't even been smoking much this resurrection.

"Can't he just find us?"

"What d'you mean?"

Wilbur winces, before nodding to the iron band around Tommy's wrist.

Tommy grimaces, staring down at his wrist with gloomy hatred. "Er, right. Yeah. Well, he *said* he wouldn't use the compass, 'cause it's less fun that way. And that is... all we have to go on."

"Great... fan-fucking-tastic..." Wilbur sighs, closing his eyes for a moment as he tries to process. "O-Okay, do we... are we trying to get somewhere? Or... or wait him out?"

Tommy huffs. "Nope. There isn't a fucking finish line or a timer, we go until *he* gives up. That's why I've never fuckin' made it so far."

"Oh," Wilbur is already exhausted. He cannot fathom continuing until *Dream* is the one who gets tired.

"Come on, then. Normally by now Dream is shouting my fuckin' name, but I don't like the quiet much either, shady as fuck," Tommy grabs Wilbur's arm and hoists him to his feet.

"What'd... How do you not pass out?" Wilbur actually resists this time.

"Eh?"

“Like, you don’t... you don’t rest for more than a few minutes, like, how do you get... how do you get *water*?”

Tommy glances up. “It’s raining, innit?” He says dully. “Now come on.”

“It’s r— *It’s raining?!* ” Wilbur blusters as Tommy drags him forward.

“Shut up! It’s like you want to get a fuckin’ axe to the spine, *jesus*,” Tommy rolls his eyes. “Surprised you haven’t fallen on your face any more.”

He’s grateful to not be alone, and the good still outweighs the bad, but right now Tommy doesn’t have time to be gentle, he can only show his affection at present by bullying Wilbur into staying alive.

Wilbur just tries to keep up. He hasn’t taken Tommy’s shortness personally. He scans the ground with almost practiced precision.

Which is why he spots the glint of the wire, raindrops sticking to it so to Wilbur it might as well have been a beacon, but Tommy is looking ahead, he’s scanning the treeline, his footsteps automatic, so clumsily, desperately, Wilbur vaults forward and shoves Tommy aside just as the wire *snaps*.

Tommy doesn’t understand. He was running and then Wilbur started to slip out of his hand and instead he felt Wilbur fucking *crash into him again* and throw him forward—

But Wilbur didn’t land on him. He stopped falling.

Tommy struggles to his feet, a bit shaky now, palms stinging, and turns around, puzzled.

For a second, Tommy thinks Wilbur had somehow fallen, pulled himself back, and then leaned against a tree.

Then he sees the blood.

“T-Tripwire—” Wilbur chokes out, staring at the bolt now sticking through his chest, pinning him to the tree. *Bolt* felt like too simple a word, Wilbur was fucking skewered by the thing.

“Wil,” Tommy doesn’t know what to do.

“G-Go, you s-should— You should run, I’ll be dead soon anyway,” Wilbur lets out a whimpering laugh, a shaky hand brushing against the spear.

Tommy is still frozen. He doesn’t know how to explain to Wilbur how little this matters, Tommy can keep running, but eventually he won’t be able to keep going, and he doesn’t want to leave him.

“Tommy, please, j-just run, you c-can’t do a—” Wilbur takes a wheezing, choked breath, coughing so blood sprays from his lips. “Can’t do anything...” He mumbles. His lung must’ve been pierced. Tommy does not envy the death waiting for him, but if the damage is

severe enough, hopefully it won't take long. Tommy doesn't think he can bring himself to make it any faster for him.

Tommy doesn't want to leave him, but he knows logically if he gives up Dream is just as likely to hurt Wilbur to punish him. Maybe it doesn't matter, but Tommy *should* keep going. It comes back to those two warring strategies. He should keep running as a matter of appeasement. If he runs, if he keeps Dream entertained, maybe he'll leave Wilbur behind to die, rather than prolong his suffering.

"Fine, alright, Wil, I—" Tommy steps closer before hesitating, agitated on his feet. He has an idea. One Wilbur likely won't appreciate. "Oh, fuck it, I'm sorry about this—" and he rips the spear from Wilbur's chest. Tommy tries not to gag from the sound it makes leaving his body. "Fuck, I'm so—"

Wilbur manages a weak wave of dismissal. He doesn't have much time left. At least the pain is getting fuzzier around the edges too.

Tommy nods grimly, the spear in his hand is still drenched in his brother's blood, but now he has a *weapon*. So Tommy leaves him; he doesn't even look back. Maybe it's just because Tommy is in fucking fight or flight mode, he's not quite acting like himself and maybe running is selfish, but right now it feels more like practical.

Tommy feels like he took a fucking swiftness potion. Wilbur, love him as he does, was like a bonus weight around his wrist. Tommy pushes through the trees, ducking and weaving with ease, now hypervigilant to tripwires, his footsteps stay light and careful and thus far his feet have not bled on this run, and for a moment Tommy thinks he might actually have a shot at this.

"Oh, Tommy!" Dream calls through the trees. "You forgot something back here!"

Tommy doesn't look back. *Fuck fuck fuck fuck—*

Tommy had also not considered the fact that *Punz* is also out here somewhere. He's armed now, but he has no chance against Dream, *without* someone else in full Netherite to back him up. Still, Tommy is going to try to go down fighting this time. He's tired of getting shot in the back running away. Tommy stops, ducking behind a tree and pressing himself back against it, listening for footfalls over the light patter of rain against the leaves.

"Oh, Tommy! Come on! It's just you and me out here, Punz is gonna keep an eye on your brother for us. Why don't you come on out? You know, I'm surprised you were so quick to leave him. I thought you *cared*?" Dream is maybe a dozen yards off now from how close his taunts are. Tommy waits. Dream could just walk right past him.

"Don't think I didn't notice what you're doing, Tommy," Dream sounds just a bit less teasing, a little colder. Tommy doesn't care. He's focused on trying to figure out how much closer Dream is getting. "Wilbur is missing something. I have a feeling you took it. And now... what, are you gonna try to *kill* me? Remember the last time you hid from me with a knife? You never have the *guts*, Tommy. Not without half the server to back you up—"

Tommy waits until he can hear him just beyond the tree before he steps out, stabbing at the first sheen of enchanted armor, aiming just above for Dream's fucking throat.

Dream steps out of the way, he'd been waiting. Tommy stumbles forward, but he's quick to jump back, still holding the spear tightly as Dream swings his axe at him.

"*Really* Tommy?" Dream tuts him. "You're not playing the game right! You're supposed to *run*. You're *prey* remember?"

"What, Dream? I thought you knew how to hunt. You never seen a wolf get fuckin' smacked by a pissed off goat?" Tommy paces carefully, following Dream's axe. He knows one swing would shatter his spear, he can't block, he has to dodge.

"That's not the point of the game, Tommy. You know, I put all this work into making it fun, setting up those little *surprises* for you to find, and you decide to break the rules!" Dream swings at Tommy's head. Tommy ducks, feeling the axe brush against his hair.

Maybe Tommy took his own metaphor a bit too much to heart, as he's now at the perfect height to ram against Dream's chest. He throws himself forward, hitting Dream's chestplate hurting worse than hitting the ground, but Dream stumbles back and Tommy knows to get out fast. He uses Dream to propel himself backwards, pushing off of his chest so by the time Dream has swung his axe back at him, Tommy is out of reach.

Now Dream is irritated. "You're such an arrogant little brat! You *still* don't know how to listen, do you?!" Dream snaps, swinging his axe far more purposefully now.

Tommy cannot take a single blow. He won't get *grazed* by an axe, it will dig in, and Tommy will be stuck. He just has to keep out of range. He knows the distance Dream's axe can get quite well. Tommy also knows he won't be able to keep this up for much longer, and he knows it's unhinged, but he might as well have fun with it. "You're getting *slow*, Dream!" Tommy says cheerfully, leaping back as Dream swings again. It's true, actually. Dream isn't used to such a resistant victim, he's gotten complacent. Tommy sticks his tongue out at him. "You're right, this is a little fun!"

Dream takes a leaf out of Tommy's book. He does not swing the axe, no, he throws himself forward. That is *much* harder to dodge than a single blade. Tommy gasps, the wind knocked out of him as Dream tackles him to the ground.

"What the fuck is the matter with you, huh?!" Dream snarls. He's dropped the axe.

Tommy feels a bit foggy now. He must have hit his head. But he still managed to keep ahold of his spear. It's a weak attempt, but at least he tries to bring it up toward Dream's face, even if Dream grabs it from him as easily. Dream doesn't toss it aside, he presses the wood down on Tommy's throat.

"Pathetic. Even when you're trying to cause problems, you're still a weak little bitch," Dream scoffs. Tommy struggles to push the spear off of his throat, fighting to draw breath. Dream presses down harder. "Aw, poor Tommy, what, you can't breathe? Why do you need to breathe, huh? Shouldn't you go apologize to Wilbur for abandoning him?"

Tommy claws at the damp earth around him, lungs aching, until he touches metal. Tommy grabs Dream's own axe and swings it at the man's head. The pressure on his throat lets up. Tommy gasps, struggling to move as Dream falls away from him. Tommy starts to scramble to his feet when he feels a painful grip on his ankle, dragging him back into the mud.

"You're going to fucking regret that—" Dream is still set on choking the life out of him, reaching for his throat— "*Fuck!*" Dream jerks back as Tommy bites down on his hand. He tears free, Tommy just barely managing to draw blood, and backhands him across the face with his other hand, leaving Tommy too dazed to try again.

"Learned that from your brother, huh?" Dream says bitterly, shaking out his hand.

Tommy would love to make a smug, witty retort, but he's a bit preoccupied with staying conscious. His head pounds, and he still feels like he's not getting enough air. Which probably has to do with half of Dream's weight still crushing his chest.

"I can't *believe* you actually tried to *fight* me," Dream sighs, shaking his head. "What the fuck has gotten into you all the sudden?"

Tommy manages to give him a scathing look, spitting some of Dream's blood— and probably some of his own because Dream definitely busted his lip— at that white mask.

"W-What—" Tommy says hoarsely, barely audible. "Not..." he stops for a weak inhale. "N-Not having f-fun, Dream?"

"Hm," Dream considers him for a moment, reaching back for the spear. "I'll remember this attitude of yours in the next round."

Tommy feels a sharp pain in his chest, has a split second to note the parallel wound he and Wilbur now share, and then there is only blackness.

Dream had mocked him for leaving Wilbur, and in the moment Tommy hadn't regretted it, it had been the only choice to make, but returning to the void and seeing his brother, he hates that this is what he's become.

"Wil? You— You alright?" Tommy focuses up easily, stepping forward toward Wilbur's figure onto the platform.

"So... he caught up? He got you?" Wilbur has been pacing for the last hour.

"Yeah, yeah he did— I am so sorry, man, I left you and I—"

"I told you to."

"But the spear—"

"If you hadn't taken it, I probably would've been alive long enough for Dream to do something worse, so."

They stare at each other, helpless and knowing they have someone far better to worry about than Tommy's ability to flee.

"There's..." Tommy sighs. "There's gonna be another round, I think. Dream made it sound like..." Tommy tries for some optimism, "hey, maybe if we win this one, I mean. We'll get to eat. Maybe we'll..." he shrugs. "Get lucky, I guess."

Wilbur doesn't know what to say. He feels like crying again, so instead he just pulls Tommy into a hug. "I am so sorry, Tommy, I am so sorry I left you alone in this and—"

"Oh, just shut up about it, will you?" Tommy mumbles before burying his face in Wilbur's shoulder. "Didn't know there was gonna be traps. That's— that's never happened before, what the *fuck*—"

"How often has this happened in general?"

Tommy pulls away just to scowl at him. "Stop looking for more ways to feel like you let me down or whatever the fuck. There was nothing you could do then, and there's nothing you can do now. Just— Just next round, try to keep up, yeah?"

"And we'll— We'll both keep an eye out for trip wires, yeah?" Wilbur nods.

"Yeah, yeah if we... you know how it works now, so maybe we could work together and shit," Tommy comes around to the idea. "And we might be able to spot the dispensers, big old block is a bit more obvious than a line, I'd think—"

"Wake up."

Tommy is back in the jungle, laying in the mud. He looks for Wilbur immediately. His brother's chest is still drenched in blood, washed out only partially by the rain. He's alive again too.

"Okay! New plan, you two," Dream says cheerfully. "One of you," he kicks Wilbur, "is going to run that way, and the other," he kicks Tommy, "is going to run that way!"

So much for working together.

"What, you two can't hear all the sudden?" Dream says scoldingly. "I'll give you thirty seconds again."

Tommy struggles to his feet. Wilbur still hasn't gotten up.

"Come on," Tommy tugs on his arm. "You gotta go, Wil."

Wilbur tries to focus up, reluctant to leave. "But Tommy, you—"

"Opposite ways. That's what I said. And to be clear, *I've started counting*," Dream cuts in.

"Fuck— Alright, Wil, just go—" Tommy turns around and starts running, pausing and wasting precious seconds to look back and make sure Wilbur is doing the same.

The two of them disappear and Punz turns toward where Wilbur had taken off, watching the seconds tick by. Dream reaches out a hand to stop him.

“Let’s swap. Just this time. I’ll go after Wilbur, you go after Tommy.”

Punz gives him a wary look.

“What difference does it make?” Dream scoffs. “And try not to kill him. I want to kill Wilbur and I don’t like them spending so much time together in Limbo.”

“Fine,” Punz shrugs, turns around, and instead starts after Tommy.

Dream turns in the direction Wilbur had staggered off. This hunt will definitely be easier than going after Tommy, but Dream doesn’t plan on it being boring.

“*Oh, Wilbur!*” Dream calls, axe swinging lazily at his side. “Come on out! I just want to talk!”

It’s too easy. Tommy figured out when and how to hide remarkably quickly. Wilbur most certainly has not.

“I see you, Wilbur!” Dream jeers. Wilbur glances over his shoulder and picks up his pace. He doesn’t seem to realize he’s already lost. Dream pulls out his crossbow, aiming carefully. The bolt lands inches from Wilbur’s head, causing him to stumble back right in time for Dream to cut off his other way out with the axe. “Really, Wilbur,” Dream says almost pityingly. “I thought you’d do better than *that*.”

Wilbur backs away slowly, chest still heaving as he tries to catch his breath. “W-Well, let’s just say I’m a little out of practice,” he rasps, staring at Dream’s axe.

“Hm,” Dream is amused. “Here’s what’s going to happen,” Dream swings, not with much urgency, allowing Wilbur to jump back, but each time Wilbur tries to back far enough from the blade to run, Dream is sure to match pace, Wilbur stumbling backwards over roots. “The next time Tommy runs his mouth,” Dream cuts Wilbur off with a shove from the blunt side of his axe, throwing him back toward the underbrush, giving Wilbur one more thing to get caught in. “The next time he disobeys,” Dream kicks Wilbur when he starts to fall, actually helping him back to his feet in a demeaning, violent sort of manner, “or hesitates,” Dream lazily grabs Wilbur’s sleeve when he tries to run, deflecting Wilbur’s panicked attempt to claw at his face with ease, “or whatever.” Wilbur falls again, catching himself on a tree, baffled like a mouse not understanding why the cat decides to toy with it instead of just eating it. “You’re going to hit him.”

Wilbur is completely disarmed by this, making no effort to sidestep Dream threatening to bludgeon him with the flat of the axe again, instead he gets the wind knocked out of him even more than Dream’s words already have. Wilbur wheezes from the ground, struggling to his feet. “Y-You’re-” He coughs. “You’re fucking insane, why the hell would I-” He’s quickly silenced by Dream raising the blade of the axe inches from his throat.

“Because,” Dream steps forward, putting the axe away and exchanging it for a thin short sword, twirling it through his fingers. “If you don’t, I’ll hurt him worse.” Wilbur tries to sidestep around the tree he’s found himself cornered against and is cut off with a gasp, the thin blade whistling through the air as it brushes close enough for Wilbur to see a couple of his curls drift away, cut off. “A *lot* worse,” Dream says matter-of-factly.

Wilbur looks away from the blade, glaring at Dream, disgust evident. “You’re a sick fucking bastard, Dream, you can’t actually expect me to—”

Dream steps closer, the blade pressing against Wilbur’s chest, threatening to cut him open with just a little more pressure. “Do you not understand what *a lot worse* means? He’s getting off easy this way, Wilbur. Just one little slap from you, or I’ll...” Dream slices through the front of Wilbur’s sweater, just barely starting to break the skin on his stomach, “what’d you say you were gonna do to me back in the day? Oh,” Dream laughs. Wilbur’s breathing hitches as the cut deepens and blood begins to flow in earnest. “I’ll *disembowel* him.”

Wilbur’s gaze flickers from the sword still pressing into him back to Dream’s empty, masked expression. “...Why? What’s the— What’s the fucking *point*?”

“That’s not your problem, is it?” Dream says it mockingly. He knows they both know the answer to that. Dream pulls the sword back, just enough to stop the wound from getting worse. “You’re a *bad influence*, Wilbur. So you’ve got to make up for it!” He leans forward, the blade inches from his throat, so Wilbur is pinned to the tree. That mask filling his line of sight. “I want you to *correct* his behavior.”

“And this is how I do that?” Wilbur glares at him. Easier than acknowledging that he’s fucking horrified because he cannot see a way out, not from the jungle, and certainly not from what Dream is telling him.

“Obviously. And I want you to really play it up. You loved a good performance, didn’t you, Wilbur? So, you’re gonna hit Tommy, and you’re going to yell at him. You’re gonna make sure he *knows* he fucked up.” Dream sounds far too proud of himself. Wilbur wishes he could tear him limb from limb.

“If I do this, you think, what, Tommy is going to *like* you again?” Wilbur sneers.

“No,” Dream laughs. “That sort of process would take *much* more work. But I do think this might make it so he doesn’t like *you*.”

Wilbur stares at him, unable to fathom a reply to quantify his anger.

Dream continues unbothered. “And if you tell him that I ordered you to, trust me, I’ll know. It’s...” Dream’s voice is cool and calm and utterly deadly. “What did you call it? A panopticon?”

Wilbur gets chills, pressing himself further into the tree, his hair standing on end.

Dream tilts his head, assessing his victim's horror with an analytical eye. "I think you get the message." With a flick of his wrist, he slits Wilbur's throat.

Chapter End Notes

yeah. the horror is no longer from surprise, but rather knowing exactly what's coming ^-
^

Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

CW: violence, temporary character death, c!Dream being c!Dream, suicidal behavior

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tommy hates leaving Wilbur behind again, but he can't pretend it hasn't made things easier as well. He doesn't hear Dream calling after him, but still, once he's run hard enough that his vision starts to blur and his lungs begin to feel almost pinched, he finds a spot to hunker down and catch his breath. He waits, he listens. There is none of Dream's mocking behind him. That makes him nervous. Once Tommy thinks he can keep going without passing out, he resumes his trek, and out of the corner of his eye, he sees a white hoodie underneath a Netherite chestplate. *Fuck*. Tommy can hear Punz not far behind, even if he doesn't say anything. Tommy only focuses on what's in front of him, until Punz's footsteps die out and it's just fighting through branch after branch and climbing over roots and one step after another.

Tommy makes a sharp turn, knowing exactly where to go to lose him, a narrow divot between denser branches, but he doesn't make it there, instead he feels something catch on his ankle and then the world is rapidly flipped upside down. Tommy struggles to get his bearings, hanging from a rope around his ankle, it pulling tight enough to cut off circulation.

"Oh," Punz stops short. Apparently he'd been not far behind him, unlike Dream he just doesn't announce himself.

"S-Stay the fuck away from me—" Tommy swings wildly in Punz's direction, unable to exert any control as he twists in the air.

"You know, I didn't realize this was the setup. I mean, it's a good thing you got stuck on this one instead of shot. Dream wants you alive," Punz says matter-of-factly.

Tommy's head pounds, already dizzy as all the blood rushes down. "Get me down!"

Punz stares at him, amused. "I'll have to figure out how. And I can't have you falling on your head and breaking your neck."

Tommy stops struggling, still swinging slightly. "I'm gonna... I'm gonna pass out..."

"Go ahead."

"F-Fuck you..."

"What're you complaining about?" Punz scoffs. "Your brother got skewered in the chest."

“Not a fan of that... either...”

“Mhm,” Punz has the audacity to sound bored.

“Fuck, just get me down before I puke. *And* it comes out my nose. That will fucking suck for both of us I’ll make sure of it,” Tommy does his best to glare at him.

“Yeah, fine, you better catch yourself so you don’t break your neck,” Punz goes to the tree nearest, his sword cutting into the rope and then Tommy is falling, his wrists taking most of the toll, pain shuddering up his arms.

“Oh fuck...” Tommy feels the breath knocked out of him, curling into a ball. Out of the corner of his eye he sees Punz approaching. He struggles to his feet, fighting not to fall, he starts to run again and immediately falls again from the fucking rope on his ankle.

“Did you like, forget?” Punz says dryly. He’s standing on the rope.

“Fuck you!” Tommy snarls, fumbling to free himself, the rope digging into his ankle.

“That’s what you’re gonna do? Alright, go ahead,” Punz nods.

“I f-fucking hate you—“ Tommy hates that his voice is shaky, like a frustrated child trying not to cry, which isn’t inaccurate.

“Yeah, fine,” Punz shrugs.

Tommy manages to free himself and starts to get back to his feet, pausing for a moment, as he sees Punz’s crossbow level with his head.

“You wanna run?” Punz says with almost lazy challenge.

“Y-You know...” Tommy stands slowly, hands raised and passive, giving no indication of being about to take off. “If I didn’t know any better, Punz, I’d say you were enjoying this.”

Punz frowns. “Well, you should know better. I’m just here to do a job.”

“And what job is that?”

“Hunt you down, don’t kill you,” he shrugs.

Tommy resists a shiver. “A-And why does Dream want me alive?”

“I dunno, don’t care. Didn’t bother to ask.”

Tommy almost smirks. “You’ve caught on, have you? Stopped asking questions?”

Punz bristles. “I don’t need to,” he says coldly.

“Right, right,” Tommy placates him. “Still, you can see it now, can’t you?”

“What?”

Tommy grins, mocking and belittling. “The leash.”

Punz lowers his crossbow for a moment, stepping forward, even he didn’t know what he intended on doing in his brief anger, but Tommy sees the chance and tries to run for it.

He makes it a couple yards before there’s a crossbow bolt in his leg.

“O-Ow...” Tommy says breathlessly.

“You done? Or are you gonna try crawling away next?”

Tommy glares daggers at him, hands trembling as he fumbles with the bolt in his leg. A deep inhale, and on the exhale he rips it free. “*Fuck— oh, f-fuck—*” he gasps. His wrists hadn’t liked that much motion either.

“Good job. You’ll bleed out faster,” Punz says dryly.

Still, Tommy persists, struggling to stand, his left hand barely catching himself against the tree. At least his leg doesn’t hurt too bad. It’s his left one, so other than the usual stiffness, it’s almost numb, instead only a little prickly. He holds the bloody bolt like a weapon.

“Oh?” Punz seems to be burying a laugh. “Okay, I see how it is. Come on, then. What’re *you* gonna do with that toothpick?” He spreads his arms, as if to make himself more open to attack, in his fully Netherite armor.

Tommy manages to look defiant as he raises the crossbow bolt, not to swing at Punz, but instead pure spite pushes him past previous limits as he goes to slash it across a major artery on his neck.

“No— What the fuck?!” Punz lunges forward and manages to grab Tommy’s wrist before he can do more than break the skin. “*What the fuck?!*”

Tommy cries out as his wrist protests, sharp pain pulsing up his arm. “Let go of me!”

“Then don’t try to slit your throat what the actual fuck?!” Punz snaps, taking the bolt from his grip. “Come here—” Punz forces him to the ground, grabbing the coil of rope and Tommy immediately tries to crawl away, wrists held protectively close to his chest. “It’s not for— Fucking hell, dude—” He pulls Tommy back by his ankle, tying the rope just above the arrow wound he himself had made. “Just to stop the bleeding for a minute. It won’t need a tourniquet if you just give me a sec—” Punz rummages in his inventory for a health pot.

Tommy is staring at his sword.

Punz is quick to stow it in his inventory, half convinced Tommy would throw himself onto a blade just about now. Without another word, he splashes the potion onto the wound until the bleeding stopped. He reaches toward Tommy’s face and Tommy flinches back, slapping at his hands.

“Stop! Just— Just let me—” He grabs Tommy’s jaw, Tommy whines, unable to tug free, Punz forcing him to turn his head so he can stop the far slower trickle of blood from Tommy’s

attempt at his own throat.

Tommy shakes free the moment he can, spitting in Punz's direction as a last effort of defiance.

"Oh, you got him!" Dream pipes up cheerfully from a few meters off.

Tommy flinches, turning around quickly to keep the man in his sights. Dream has Wilbur thrown over his shoulder.

"Yep," Punz sighs, much more irritated by the thought.

"Aw, you cut him loose," Dream sounds disappointed, looking up at the cut line from the tree. "He was supposed to stay up until he passed out."

Punz gives Dream a weary, irritable look. "*You* were the one who wanted him alive."

"Yeah, I guess," Dream shrugs, adjusting his hold on Wilbur's corpse. Tommy is doing his best not to look at him now, at either of them. "Okay, so, I'm gonna take *this*," he nods to Wilbur's body, "back down to the base and then I'll stasis you two back, how about that?"

Punz shrugs. "Yeah, fine, whatever."

"Y-You don't want me to talk to him," Tommy says hoarsely. He's still refusing to look in Dream's direction. He doesn't want to see his brother's dead eyes staring back.

"What?"

"That's why you want me alive, s-so me and Wil can't talk without you f-fuckin' in the walls, o-or listening—"

"You sound crazy, Tommy," Dream scoffs. "What, you think I'm listening to you two crying to each other all the time? I have better things to do."

"Not all the time..." Tommy mutters. "A... a pen-option-con or whatever the fuck..."

"What was that, Tommy?" Dream asks.

"Nothing..."

"Okay, just be quick," Punz ignores the exchange just as he's also ignoring Wilbur's body, just by resolutely staring only at Dream's mask.

"I mean, if you don't want Tommy to annoy you while you wait just tie him up somewhere," Dream shrugs.

Tommy shoots Punz a reproachful glare, daring him to.

"Just— Get a move on, will you?" Punz does his best to ignore that also.

"See you in a bit," with a sarcastic salute, Dream trudges back toward the coast.

Punz huffs, arms folded across his chest.

“...so, why are you here, again?” Tommy asks.

“What?”

Tommy picks at the fresh scabbing on the wound through his leg, resting his chin on his palm gloomily. “I mean. What, you’ve given up asking questions and shit, so how’re you gonna figure out being immortal or whatever the fuck?”

“I’m not gonna talk about this with *you*, ” Punz scoffs.

“Why not? Not like you got anyone else to talk to,” Tommy points out. “Or, what, d’you think I’ll snitch to Dream?”

Punz doesn’t reply.

“To be fair, maybe I would. If Dream was willing to bargain proper for it,” Tommy just keeps talking. “But that depends on what you might do. I could help you, you know.”

Punz’s irritation grows louder. Tommy, in all his helplessness, acting like he can do something for *him*. “Shut up.”

“Or what?” Tommy says dryly. “You’ll beat the shit out of me? Been there, done that, bitch boy,” he jeers.

“What do you want from this, Tommy?” Punz snaps.

“Eh? Lots of things, you know?” Tommy shrugs. His eyes wander to the direction Dream had headed off in. “I want him to leave Wilbur alone,” Tommy’s voice softens, words not really meant for Punz.

Punz doesn’t look at him. “Yeah. Well, nothing I can do about that.”

~

Wilbur paces Limbo. Hours and Tommy has not appeared. Wilbur would like to think Tommy got away, or that he’s at least still running.

Wilbur knows better by now.

“Okay, okay when he brings you back, you– You just kill him!” Wilbur laughs hoarsely. “You just– The moment you’re conscious, he thinks you’re weak, you come back, you go for his fucking throat!”

He almost smacks a pillar, turning to pace the opposite way. “Because– Because you don’t have another fucking *option*, right?! Because you *can’t*, you fucking can’t *do* that to him, not after all the shit you’ve been through! A-And you can’t let *Dream* do what he wants either, s-so you *have* to kill him!”

Wilbur shouts at the walls, gesturing furiously to nothing. “But you can’t fucking kill him because you’re *pathetic!* Fuck!” His pacing resumes in earnest. “How do we tell Tommy? H-How do we *tell* him he has to do exactly as Dream says or– or either you’re gonna hurt him–” Wilbur’s voice breaks, he feels sick, “f-fuck, you can’t, you can’t– s-so we gotta tell him! At the very fucking *least* he should get a say in it! I just– If I could ask him, if he knew what Dream was threatening, if I could tell him I didn’t mean it, *god fucking damnit* this is *so* fucked!”

Wilbur stops, leaning his head against a pillar and covering his eyes. “I don’t know what to do... how am I supposed to–” He sinks to the floor, words caught in his throat. He chokes out, “I don’t wanna hurt my little brother...”

As if in reply, as if to say *you don’t have a choice*, Wilbur opens his eyes to damp stone bricks instead of tile.

“*Wake up.*”

Wilbur’s gaze wanders to that white mask.

“Welcome back,” Dream says, leaning over and staring down at him, arms clasped behind his back patronizingly. “Just wanted to *clarify* some things, Wilbur, before Tommy gets here.”

Wilbur sits up slowly, doing his best to make himself appear small and disoriented. “O-Okay... Like what?”

“Well, first off, you aren’t going to tell him. If you do, I mean,” he almost laughs. “Think about it this way, without this little... *game*, I’ll have no reason to hold back, no reason to explain why I’ve hurt him, so, I’ll do whatever I–”

Wilbur vaults off of the ground, throwing himself against Dream, and he reaches out to rip out Dream’s throat.

He manages to break skin, dirty nails beaded with blood as he tries to push further, to *dig* in enough to fucking tear it out, but by then Dream has his axe out as he shoves Wilbur back to the ground. Dream stumbles forward, one hand grabbing his throat. Wilbur starts to stand again, so Dream quickly presses his boot down on his throat until Wilbur can’t move, although he still tries, scratching at the Netherite boots above him and trying to knock him over.

“Holy shit,” Dream laughs hoarsely, pulling away his hand to stare at the blood. He and Wilbur both now share a bloodied neck, even if Wilbur’s has become a thin scar and Dream’s is far from fatal. “You were... you were gonna *rip my throat out?*” Dream almost sounds impressed.

“I-If you bend d-down a little maybe I– maybe actually will–” Wilbur manages to hiss even with the weight on his throat.

“Hm, I don’t think so, but I’m not going to punish Tommy for this, just because I didn’t think you had it in you to be *that* kind of brutal. I mean, I’ve beaten Tommy to death before, sure.

Killed him with my bare hands,” Dream shrugs. “I haven’t ripped him apart like that, though.”

Wilbur can’t resist a desperate, “d-don’t–”

“Weren’t you listening?” Dream leans a little closer to mock him. Not close enough to reach. “I am *not* going to punish him. *This* time. Although, remember he’s still on the table the next time you get bold. But... well, I appreciate the inspiration in case you get selfish again, right? Let’s get back on topic,” and with far too much ease considering their recent scuffle, Dream grabs Wilbur’s wrist and wraps it in a chain already trailing into the wall. He steps out of reach before Wilbur can even try to stand. “Anyway, as I was saying. If you even *hesitate*, Wilbur, he will get hurt, got it? If I give you a nod, if I scold Tommy in any way, you hit him. *Properly*. Don’t think I won’t notice if you’re a pussy about it. And then you yell at him,” Dream meanders across the stretch of cell Wilbur can’t reach, gesturing lazily as he talks. “And you tell him to shut up, to stop making things worse, you know, like he always does, tell him to listen for once in his life,” Dream stops his pacing, turning to face him. “Something along those lines. And maybe if you’re good enough, I’ll give you food, I’ll even give *both* of you food, okay?”

Wilbur stares at him, nausea intermingling with rage. He feels like this hatred is a physical thing, projecting fury like it can somehow burn, but even this loathing isn’t enough to actually save anyone. “What if... what if Tommy doesn’t do anything wrong? I won’t have to do shit, right?”

Dream laughs softly. “Tommy *always* does something wrong. You just have to wait.” Dream nods. “Okay, Wilbur. You understand the stakes now, don’t you? If Tommy finds out, if you try to warn him what’s coming, it’s not like it matters, because then I will jump back to *my* methodology. Which is, you know, targeting Tommy’s worst fears and *literally* breaking him. You remember that day back in the vault? *Ages* ago now, your first week alive, I think. You *heard* the way Tommy screamed. I really thought he’d lost his mind, I’m actually kind of surprised he ever got back some semblance of sanity, y’know? Don’t tell me *you* want to be a responsible for a repeat of that?”

Wilbur is no longer looking at him, staring at the ground, wishing he could self destruct and kill Dream with him.

“Didn’t think so.”

Dream leaves.

Wilbur remains on the floor, until he hears the click of redstone next door and knows he is no longer alone.

“Tommy?!” Wilbur scrambles to his feet, heading for the back wall, the rattle of the chain irritating.

“Wil?!” Tommy calls back immediately. “Fuck– Did he hurt you?”

Wilbur sighs, unable to resist feeling endeared by Tommy's incessant caring. "No, not really. You?"

"Nah, Punz got me instead. Just shot me in the leg when I tried to run, but it's mostly healed now."

"Okay," Wilbur doesn't know what to do with that. It's not like he can comfort Tommy from here. "So I take it you didn't get away, then?"

Tommy laughs, and that's enough to give Wilbur a tiny spark of relief. "Nah, Punz shot me in the leg, I kept fuckin' runnin' like a god and the poor bastard had to stasis me back." A pause. "I wish... barely made it a hundred blocks..." A pause. "What about you? Dream got you, yeah?"

"Wasn't too bad. Cut my throat. Only was alive for a few minutes, I think. Maybe less."

"That's..." Tommy seems to also be struggling with what to say to that as well. "That's alright, could be worse, eh?"

"Yeah. Could be worse," Wilbur struggles with something internally. He tries to see through the thin crack in the wall, but there is only blackness, zero indication of someone else watching. "Could be a lot worse... hey, Tommy, it's— It's really fucking important we don't make Dream mad, alright?"

"What?"

"Just— I know already that's sort of the goal, but I *really* mean it. Please. D-Don't insult him or anything, okay?"

"What'd you mean, Wil?" Tommy sounds almost suspicious.

"J-Just trust me, it's not— It's not worth it."

"What's that *mean*, exactly? Just tell me what you're on about."

Wilbur doesn't know how to reply.

Tommy continues, quiet and weighted. "...Did he say he was gonna hurt you, Wil? To punish me?"

Wilbur jumps at the lie, knowing it might be the only thing to convince Tommy other than the truth. "Yes. A-And it's bad, so. Please just do what he says?"

"Okay, Wil. Don't worry, I'll— I won't let him fuckin' hurt you. And if that means keeping my mouth shut... guess I can survive that," Tommy says gloomily. He almost misses the days when the consequences only reflected on him. Wilbur being here, despite the pains, is still horribly, undeniably worth it to Tommy. Despite all of his worries, at least he's no longer alone, at least there's one person in this fucked up place who he can always trust to be on his side.

~

“Could we try something, Dream?” Punz, as per usual now, phrases his request as a question.

“What?”

“I think we should try to summon XD again,” Punz paces the dome while Dream flips through that stupid journal of his.

He stops doing so, looking up. “*What?* After what happened last time?”

“Well, obviously not with Tommy or Wilbur in the room this time. But XD said something about like, one wish? I was thinking, couldn’t we just *ask* him for immortality? I mean, if he was willing to give you the revive book, why not?” Punz reasons.

“There’d be a cost. A big one. Trust me, especially for something like this. I think I just got the revive book because killing people... sustains him or something,” Dream mulls it over. “Maybe.”

“I mean, I don’t want to piss off a god either, but if he seems unenthused, we could...” Punz thinks of Dream’s demeanor, the way Tommy navigates him. “See what *he* wants. What keeps him happy and entertained or whatever.”

“Yeah, you know what? Why not. I’ve got some questions for the guy,” Dream stands, going to get another copy of the revive book.

“What, *now?*” Punz stops short. As always, Dream’s audacity— it’s not even audacity, his *entitlement*, his assumption that things will go his way— takes him by surprise.

“Yes *now*,” Dream scoffs. “When else?” Dream opens the book, concentrating not on a resurrection, but on power.

There’s this fizzle of static in the air, and then nothing. Punz and Dream both look around the dome, but XD doesn’t make an appearance. They wait in silence for another minute, as if expecting something to change.

“Did you do it right?”

“Of course I did it right,” Dream snaps.

Punz knows better than to keep arguing. “Could I try?”

“No, you don’t need to, it clearly hasn’t worked.”

“And *you’re* clearly defensive.”

“Shut up.”

A weighted pause.

“The revive book still works,” Dream says.

“Mhm.”

Dream once more looks up, scanning the dome, but god doesn’t show. “Maybe he’s just gone.”

“Or maybe he just can’t be bothered.”

“Same difference.”

Punz sighs. “Look, Dream, if we don’t start making progress soon—”

“What? What will happen, Punz? You’re gonna leave? We’ve been over this,” Dream remains cold.

“Fine. I guess I just thought you of all people wouldn’t just give up like this,” Punz has maybe taken a pointer or two from Tommy. Dream is clever, but his god complex can just as easily be an insecurity. That arrogance is a point Punz can bend.

“I haven’t *given up*. ”

“Seems like you have.”

“Fine,” Dream goes to his enderchest, returning with another stack of tnt. “I have ideas, sure, and we can test them. I’ll even give you a few copies to do whatever you want with.”

Already Punz feels like he should take this as a warning. “But?”

Dream laughs, “*but*, first I need you to do something for me.”

Punz warily accepts the tnt. “And that is?”

“First, you’re gonna blow up L’Manberg.”

~

Tubbo is so tired.

He leaves the Camarvan and still smells the sharp scent of blaze powder, but still they make potions and still the others search the oceans for Tommy and Wilbur. At least Tubbo assigning Ghostbur the task of looking for the traps had been successful. Sure, it was like the server suddenly got dotted with a ton of creeper holes, but at least no one else had gotten hurt.

Tubbo still hasn’t finished Tommy’s letter.

He regrets starting it, he regrets discovering it in the first place. And it almost feels cruel, like Tommy is trying to say goodbye, and Tubbo is denying him that.

Tubbo shouldn't be awake right now. It's late. People are still patrolling the server, but that doesn't mean it's safe to wander off alone at night. Still, Tubbo makes the walk from his home to New L'Manberg. He doesn't know where else to go.

Under the light of the floating lanterns, Tubbo sees tnt. His impulse is to run away, an instinct learned through blood, but instead he runs forward. Tnt means Dream, and Dream means Tommy. Tubbo has his armor on. He always does when he leaves the house now. He searches his inventory for his axe. Tubbo hasn't felt lucky for a long time, he's felt spited by the universe itself, but *something* must have deigned to show mercy and allow Tubbo this opportunity. How many times had Dream snuck around invisible, unhindered, laying his traps, and now Tubbo gets to cut him off at the knees.

Tubbo sees armor gleaming beside the tnt, but its wearer has taken an invis potion. Tubbo gets closer, heart thundering in his chest, he stares at maybe fifty blocks of tnt threaded in the beams underneath the platforms of New L'Manberg. Tubbo doesn't know the difference between excitement and rage anymore. Dream is trying to take one more thing from them; Dream is within reach of his axe.

Tubbo swings the axe against the the thin seam between the netherite chausses, right at the back of his knee. The man's knee gives out and he screams as he collapses backwards.

"T—" He starts to speak before quickly stopping.

Tubbo doesn't notice that he sounds wrong, not at first. The figure steps back, all of his weight on his left leg, his right bleeding profusely. He has a lighter.

"Don't you fucking dare, you're gonna blow yourself up too, and I need you alive you bastard," Tubbo snarls.

The figure also seems frozen. They're at a standstill. He could blow them both up, or he could wait to bleed out, or he could let Tubbo capture him. None of those options are ideal.

Punz also knows Tubbo is on his last life. It makes him more reluctant to kill them both.

Tubbo stares at him, a wary, grim realization dawning. "You're... you're not Dream. Are you?"

The figure across from him stays silent.

"Holy shit— It wasn't... it was never Wilbur. Who the fuck are you?!" Tubbo steps forward, looking ready to swing, and the figure lowers the lighter to the trail of redstone. "Do it. I fucking dare you." Tubbo still keeps his axe extended, but he's doing his best to type on his comm as well.

<Tubbo> fond the trator b lmanberg

Not his best work, but typing in the dark while holding an axe and keeping his eye on the terrorist in front of him, ideally it will be comprehensible.

“Now we wait, don’t we?” Tubbo glances down at the blood outlining the man’s leg, beginning to pool on the ground. “How much time d’you suppose you have left? Care to start bargaining now?” A pause, Tubbo refuses to seem weak, but he has to ask. “Do you know where Tommy is? And do you understand that saying yes might save you?”

Still, the figure does not reply.

“Come on, man, you won’t get to keep your secret identity forever. I mean, either you bleed out and I search your shit, the invis wears off, there’s not many good options for you here.”

Punz is going to have to make a sacrifice. He doesn’t want to.

Tubbo had expected him to try something, the moment Punz lunges forward he swings his axe at him, but Punz doesn’t care when it cuts into his shoulder, he shoves Tubbo away, falls back, and goes to light the tnt. It all happens too fast. Punz is a second away from lighting it when Tubbo goes to grab him.

“Get back! It’ll kill you—” Punz shouts at him, a jolt of panic as he expects Tubbo to get caught in the blast too, but he doesn’t get the chance to even light it, instead, a crossbow bolt pierces his neck, severing his spinal cord. Punz’s last second of life lets him spot Niki with her crossbow, standing on the platform above.

Tubbo falls back, stunned, as more blood makes itself visible as it gushes from its host, but the tnt didn’t light. Tubbo’s shock is at the voice.

It had been Punz’s voice, trying to push him away from the blast. *Maybe he was trying to stop me from stopping him.*

Tubbo isn’t sure.

“N-Niki—” Tubbo looks up at her, eyes wide. “You killed him.”

“I know, and I’m sorry, but I wasn’t gonna let him kill you too,” Niki looks severe. “That sounded like... that sounded like Punz to me.”

Tubbo nods.

“He’ll probably respawn at his house.”

Another nod.

Niki reloads her crossbow. “So let’s go.”

Punz sits up sharply with a gasp. He had seen nothing, his first canon death and there is no glimpse of an afterlife, he merely respawns, his neck aching like a sore muscle rather than a fatality. “Fuck— Oh, fuck, I gotta—” Punz scrambles from chest to chest, limbs weak and fighting to remember how to function properly, gathering whatever supplies he might need not already in his enderchest. He digs up a hidden chest underneath the floors of the tower, grabbing a second set of Netherite armor.

Maybe they won't know it's you.

You fucking spoke to Tubbo. You wanna take that risk?

“Oh, *fuck*—” Punz grabs a spare sword.

Of all the fucking nights to get caught. This is why he set the traps off the beaten path, but of *course* Dream had needed him to blow up L'Manberg, what else is new—

Punz's comm pings.

<Nihachu> it's Punz. Anyone who sees him stop him

Punz wants to break something. Punz had died with his comm on his wrist, so the notification just above that is no less infuriating:

Punz was slain by Nihachu.

He types out his own message.

You whisper to Dream: stasis

You whisper to Dream: RIGHT FUCKING NOW STASIS ME OUT THIS IS URGENT

Punz runs to the window, staring down at his courtyard where he sees figures moving through the dark. Dream has not replied or activated the stasis.

Okay. Okay, Punz is careful. He'll go to the basement first, he'll get to one of the tunnels. It should end up connecting to Tommy's sewer system, and he can disappear from there. Punz runs down the stairs through the tower. This only works if he can disappear before they get inside. Why the *fuck* did he bother to save Tubbo?! Maybe Niki hadn't heard him speak, maybe he could've killed Tubbo, completed his mission, destroyed L'Manberg, and gotten out *fine*.

That wouldn't have been something he could bet on regardless.

Punz makes it downstairs just as he sees torchlight through the front windows. Punz digs through the basement wall, sealing it behind him. He starts running.

Punz had neglected the irritating fact that his isolation is not endless. He had had friends once, decent acquaintances in the early days, back when his secrets were first being made, when he could be more reckless with them. Some of those friends knew the way his basement extended.

One of them had been Sapnap.

Punz spots him at the end of a long 2x2 corridor, where he had just rounded the corner and stopped, staring at him.

“You’re actually...” Sapnap speaks first, voice breaking slightly, somewhere between numb and wounded.

Punz’s impulse is a cruel one he’s clung to since the beginning. “It’s nothing personal.”

Sapnap looks grim, squaring his shoulders, raising his sword. “Okay. It’s nothing personal, but not to me, so. Aren’t you going to try to run now?”

“I don’t have to hurt you, Sapnap.”

Sapnap actually scoffs, smirking. “You think *I’m* the one who needs mercy here? Come on, Punz. I think you’re overestimating yourself a bit.”

Punz sighs. He’s still shaky from the respawn. Sapnap won’t aim to kill, their goal is to capture. Sapnap still has three lives. Punz has no qualms about taking one of them. That’s an advantage. And really, Punz just needs to last long enough for Dream to stasis him out.

When Sapnap said it was personal to him, he’d meant it.

Sapnap swings first, sword stopped from cutting across Punz’s waist only by Punz raising his arm so instead the sound of Netherite grinding against Netherite sets his teeth on edge.

Maybe Punz had underestimated Sapnap. He can’t even try to get past him when he’s busy blocking blow after blow, just trying to keep his sword from the chinks in his armor. Sapnap will tire himself out this way, surely. Sapnap is all fury, his skills allow him to get away with just letting his rage take over, but he’s going to slip up, Punz just has to wait.

“You’re—” Punz needs to make him slip up. “I didn’t know I—” Punz has to stop to brace, barely managing to shove Sapnap back and sidestep his next immediate swing. “—meant this much to you, Sapnap—”

Sapnap grits his teeth. “Why the hell are you helping him?!”

Punz knows exactly what buttons to press. “I dunno, I mean, his best friend sure wasn’t there to—” Punz deflects Sapnap’s next blow against the stone wall in a shower of sparks.

“Why did—” Sapnap stops, focusing on blocking one of the few attempts from Punz to hit back.

“You just asked me why, you have your answer—”

“No— No, you’ve seen—” Sapnap is interrupted by the sharp ringing of their blades colliding and clanging off of each other. “—you’ve seen Tommy you know what Dream—” Their swords hit against one another jarringly, the two blades forming an X between them as it becomes a test of strength, their faces close enough they can feel the other’s labored breathing as they each fight to break the other. Sapnap glances from the blades up to Punz’s face, his anger hasn’t faded, eyes blazing, but his question feels more from pain than hatred. “Why did he do this?”

“Why did *he* do this?” Punz doesn’t know why he feels offended. Shouldn’t Sapnap be asking him about *his* reasons? Punz pushes off from the wall sharply, shoving Sapnap back. “Maybe because *you* didn’t stop him,” Punz snaps.

Sapnap recovers too quickly, grief making the fire in his chest burn hotter, he doesn’t fall, just stumbles, he swings his sword the moment Punz pushes him back far enough to reach, and Punz feels the blade cut into his throat, and then with a wave of motion sickness, Punz’s knees ache as he falls back onto the trap door of the dome.

Punz barely refocuses. He has a minute left, if that, Sapnap had missed the main artery but he was definitely bleeding out. Dream steps back, startled as blood taints the water around them. Punz reaches forward, desperate.

“W-What– What do you– I don’t have a fucking health pot, what do you want from me–” Dream steps back, almost disgusted.

Punz stumbles forward toward the corridor, his hand trying to stem the blood flow. He just needs a moment, he needs to make sure he doesn’t respawn back there. Punz opens up Tommy’s cell, the one nearest to him, Tommy bolting to his feet at the sound of redstone whirring but Punz shoves past him, at the last second he touches the bed, and out of the corner of his eye he sees his comm glow as his spawn is set, then he collapses to the ground.

He’s dead a few moments later.

“What the *fuck*–” Tommy stumbles away from the body, but it’s not there for long.

Punz sits up with a gasp, a hand going to the thin white scar on his throat, the other scar split in two, an entrance wound and an exit wound around his spine.

In the past hour, Punz is down two lives.

~

Sapnap emerges from the basement, much to the surprise of the rest of the hunting party, those who had been awake enough to heed Niki’s summons, half of them stare down at their comms which now read out:

Punz was slain by Sapnap

“Sapnap, what did–” Sam asks.

“Is he not here?” Sapnap runs toward the stairs, but no one has spawned next to the bed. “I got him, I– I shouldn’t have killed him, but he should be here, right?!” He looks back at them. “Right?!”

The others are at a loss. If Punz didn’t respawn here, he could be anywhere.

“Tubbo... we’ll... we’ll keep going,” Ranboo puts a gentle hand on his shoulder. “We’ll keep looking.”

Tubbo pulls away. Silence hangs like a funeral shroud.

“Come on, we should...we should keep looking,” Sam nods to Puffy, Eret, Ranboo, and Niki, who head back outside, leaving Sapnap and Tubbo alone.

Sapnap puts a hand to his mouth, curling into a fist so tight it hurts. He doesn't know if he's trying to hold back a scream or a sob. He won't show that weakness, but Sapnap feels like he might burn up from the pain of it. He doesn't know who he has left. Dream is gone, George might as well be, and Punz had never been on his side.

Sapnap couldn't even stop him. He can't protect anyone. Apparently he shouldn't trust anyone but he almost doesn't know how to stop. All he can think about is what he has left. He cannot stop trusting Quackity or Karl or Bad or Tubbo or George if he ever fucking wakes up; and despite what warns against it, a betrayal that only added salt into the open wound of the first, it just makes him want to hold on tighter.

“I'm sorry, Tubbo. I—” He has nothing else to say. “I'm really sorry.”

Tubbo just stands there. He searches for some feeling left inside of himself, and there is nothing. He feels completely empty.

“Me too,” is all Tubbo says, staring into space. “I'm... I'm going to go. Back to New L'Manberg. Make sure the tnt doesn't go off.”

“I'll go with you,” Sapnap moves to follow, almost desperately.

“No,” Tubbo shakes his head. “I'm sorry. Maybe you should come with me, but no. Not right now.”

Sapnap nods. “I'm sorry.” He can't help but say it again.

“Not your fault,” Tubbo says dully. He turns around and leaves Punz's tower.

He meant it when he said he was going back to New L'Manberg, but he's not going to take care of the tnt just yet. If it gets blown up in the next ten minutes, at this point Tubbo thinks it might as well. Ranboo is awake and gone, Phil is in the arctic with Techno right now, there's no one left to get hurt.

So Tubbo goes through Eret's tower, and stops at his Enderchest. He pulls out a book and keeps walking. Tubbo almost sits by New L'Manberg, but he changes his mind.

He does not go into Tommy's house, but rather past it, to the bench.

Maybe it will hurt himself more, but it doesn't feel right to do it anywhere else. Tubbo isn't crying, his vision is not blurred as he starts to read.

I do want to start off saying im sorry. I know that will just piss you off more but i cant not say it you know? There's other bullshit I want to say like 'oh it wasnt about you and you couldnt have stopped me' but I know that's not what u want to hear.

I mean u don't want to hear any of this, do you?

So, Im still gonna give you what I can. To try and make this a little easier. I don't think I could've ever lived and been happy or okay knowing Wilbur was still out there getting hurt. Even if we caught Dream that didn't mean Wilbur would be okay. He'd still be alone. He'd still die and be in hell and that's the good scenario.

And im sorry that still fucking sucks for you. Im not saying I couldnt be happy with you, okay? It's more complicated than that and I hope you know that.

So. I know I can't stop you from worrying about me. Quite right to if im being honest. But don't worry yourself too much, okay? I'll be alright. I'll be with Wilbur. I'll be as alright as I can be.

Right. There are other things i need from u. You know my old vacation house out by the railway? You got to go there and look after a cow there called Harvey. Dont worry abt it if you havent gone yet, he was doing alright on his own, just wanted someone to keep an eye on him when you have the chance.

I'd apologize for leaving so many instructions and shit but nah. Im not really sorry for it, but there's not much more dont worry.

Pick one day a week to keep looking for me, because I know you'll never give up, but I want you to keep living. And hey, not saying I'd mind you finding me, but still. And I give you my permission to stop. However many years down the line it takes for you to stop mourning me and be ready to live properly again, I give you my blessing. Fill in that grave, pretend I'm still there. Move in with Ranboo. Take care of each other. See, you have to do what I say because I'm the one dying here, got it?

I've left all my shit in another chest in the house, all my sentimental shit. It's yours, of course. I love you, man. You're my best friend. And my brother. And I hope you're happy again one day.

Thank you, Tubbo. For all of it.

-Big T

Tubbo stares at Tommy's messy handwriting like somehow words can give him a piece of his best friend back. Tubbo wishes he could cry right now, but there's nothing left to give.

He's starting to think Tommy isn't coming home.

Chapter End Notes

Thought I'd let y'all know. This is (most likely, unless I change my mind idk) the last we will see of the outside world; the last of Tubbo, of all of them. You all can make up

the rest, they certainly don't find Wilbur and Tommy :)

Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

CW: how do I warn for this one. psychological terror? coerced abuse? you know what im just gonna say it

!!! THIS IS IT !!! THIS IS THE REALLY BAD ONE!!! THIS IS A VERY LOUD WARNING !!!

SPOILERS! But. Wilbur hits Tommy in this one.

I will put a CHAPTER SUMMARY in the end notes due to the intense nature of this chapter.

While it is not graphic and is relatively mild on the violence front for this fic, due to the disturbing nature of this particular situation, a summary will still be provided. I'll also have an important note about other things there as well.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tommy lays awake, half asleep, drifting.

He hasn't thought about Tubbo in days. He doesn't know he should. There is no cosmic connection telling him that something has changed, he doesn't know Tubbo is grieving. Tommy hasn't had time to breathe, let alone grieve.

It never stops.

Tommy bolts up, the click of redstone warning him of the door opening. Dream stands in the doorway. Tommy stares, waiting for Dream to move.

"Come on," Dream nods him out into the hall.

"What?" Tommy asks warily.

"Just shut up and come here."

Tommy gets up and follows him.

Dream, to Tommy's surprise, takes him next door to Wilbur's cell. Wilbur is already awake, he'd heard Tommy's door open. Tommy also notes that Wilbur has a chain around his wrist. He almost asks why, but he knows the answer. Wilbur still has a little bit of fight left in him. Tommy is aware of how insane it is that he feels bitter that his brother has to be chained up but he doesn't, the bitterness lingers nonetheless.

“Let’s chat,” Dream pushes Tommy forward, blocking the exit.

Tommy stumbles a few steps, turning around quickly, keeping Dream in his line of sights. Dream is letting Tommy stand with Wilbur. That makes him nervous, but Tommy is going to take what he can get. Almost out of habit, Tommy places himself just in front of Wilbur. Wilbur looks terrified, a kind of terror Tommy doesn’t recognize on his brother’s face. He doesn’t step any closer to Tommy, wringing his hands in front of him. Tommy glances back at him, a silent question in his eyes, *you alright?*

Wilbur doesn’t look him in the eye.

“Hello? Tommy, are you paying *attention?*” Dream says mockingly.

“Yeah– Yes, what is it, Dream?” Tommy almost sounds impatient. He *doesn’t* sound scared. It’s like Wilbur’s fear supersedes his own, as long as Wilbur is terrified, Tommy can bury his own emotions and keep himself in the line of fire. He won’t be afraid as long as Wilbur needs him.

Dream has plans in place to fix that. He has *Wilbur*. He can be patient.

“Tommy. I know you’re literate, barely, but you are, right?” Dream says. “How’s your memory?”

Tommy scowls, but he doesn’t snap back at the insult. “I dunno. Probably better than Ranboo’s.”

Dream laughs. “Good, I hope it’s a *lot* better. I have a job for you.”

Tommy doesn’t trust this. Not one bit. “A *job* for me?” He takes one more step back, reaching behind him for Wilbur, but Wilbur doesn’t step up to support him, so Tommy looks back at him, puzzled.

Wilbur reacts now, stepping forward, delicately putting a hand on Tommy’s shoulder, like he thinks the pressure will break him. Tommy is getting more nervous now. Why is *Wilbur* acting this fucking weird?

“Yeah, yeah, a *job*– hey, look at me when I’m talking to you,” Dream snaps his fingers in Tommy’s direction.

And still, Tommy does not make a harsh retort, he just turns back to face him, Wilbur’s fear aiding him in his restraint. “Yes, Dream?” Tommy fits as much of his disdain into those two words as he can manage.

Dream knows Wilbur hasn’t told him. He’s too much of a coward for that, but Dream has a feeling he’ll have to push a little harder if he wants Tommy to mess up.

“You’re going to memorize the revive book.”

Tommy laughs, when he does Wilbur holds onto his shoulder tighter. “I– *what?*”

“What’s so funny, Tommy?”

“You’re... You’re serious?” Tommy doesn’t understand it. He’s desperately trying to connect the dots; Dream threatening Wilbur in some way, Wilbur being extra skittish and trying to keep to himself, Dream trying to keep them apart in Limbo, and *now* telling Tommy to memorize the revive book. Tommy has no idea what it means.

“Yeah. Obviously,” Dream scoffs. He pulls a book out of his inventory, offering it to him. “Go on, take it.”

Tommy does, like he’s handling a live grenade. He wants to look back at Wilbur, to see if he has any idea what Dream is planning, but Dream had told him to look at him, so he will. He’s not giving this monster a single excuse to hurt his brother.

“Open it. God, do I have to give you an instruction for every little fucking thing? You don’t need my orders to *breathe*, although maybe you should, so why do you act like it’s not obvious you’re supposed to fucking open it?” Dream sneers.

Tommy knows Dream is goading him for a reaction, so instead he just opens the book. It doesn’t burn. Tommy stares at runes he is at a loss to understand.

“That’s your copy. For now. You’re not allowed to show it to Punz. Or Wilbur. And for however long it takes, to start, you’re going to fill up every empty book in your cell copying it by hand,” Dream says. Dream’s comm glows to life, he glances at the screen, disinterested.

Tommy stares at the book, flipping through pages and pages *and pages* more with a growing weariness. Dream is not asking him to do the impossible, but he’s surely asking him to do the *near* impossible. “Why’s Wilbur here for this bit, then?”

“Did I say you could ask a question, Tommy?”

Tommy glances up from the book to that stupid mask, unbothered. “I thought you said I don’t need your instruction for every little thing?” He says coolly. Tommy feels Wilbur tighten his hold on his shoulder, not enough to hurt, but enough to worry, and he finally dares to glance over at him, but Wilbur is staring at Dream with grave, fixated horror.

“*Careful, Tommy,*” Wilbur exhales the words softer than a whisper, in a way that unsettlingly reminds Tommy of Ghostbur. Wilbur still doesn’t look at him.

Dream apparently doesn’t do what Wilbur is waiting for, as he relaxes a hair, letting go of Tommy’s shoulder. Tommy is quick to refocus and look back at Dream. *Dream* should be his focus right now, *he’s* the threat.

Dream shrugs, his comm glows again but he ignores it. “Okay, fair. I *did* say that,” he seems amused enough by Tommy playing his game to let it slide. “Wilbur is here because *eventually* he’s going to be our guinea pig.”

“Aren’t I already?” Wilbur finally speaks to Dream directly, challengingly. Like he *isn’t* scared. Tommy cannot follow where Wilbur’s head is at right now.

“Yeah, but not for Tommy.”

“So...” Tommy continues to try and piece things together. “I’m not just making copies. You... you want me to memorize it, and... and then I’ll use it to bring back Wilbur?” Tommy feels like he’s missing something, more than one something. He chooses his words carefully. “...Can I ask why?”

Dream considers this for a moment, head tilted slightly. He hums. “No.”

Tommy *almost* makes an irritated reply, but he holds his resolve. Tommy is actually quite proud of himself for that, particularly as his restraint doesn’t come from being scared out of his mind. Not right now at least.

“Now that we’re all on the same page—” Dream’s comm glows yet again. Dream sighs irritably, finally reading it. “Oh. Shit. Come on, Tommy,” Dream grabs Tommy by the arm, pulling him back into the hallway, Tommy looking back at Wilbur and for a moment he thinks his brother looks *relieved* to see him go, but before he can think on what the fuck that means, Dream unceremoniously shoves him back in his cell before shutting both doors.

Tommy is alone for maybe thirty seconds, and then he isn’t, as instead Punz enters. Punz stumbles forward, blood pouring between his fingertips desperately clasped to his own throat, reaching a trembling hand for the bed, before he collapses. His body respawns right there, shooting up with a gasp, a moment later.

A weighted pause, Punz collecting his things, hands trembling, still stained with blood, but no one says a word.

“What the *fuck*?” Tommy breaks the silence hoarsely.

“Tommy, just— just stay here,” Dream grabs Punz’s arm, pulling him out of the cell, leaving Tommy baffled and with a trail of blood across his floor. Dream waits until they’re back in his library before he continues. “What happened?”

“Sapnap... he got me, got me right before you pulled me out,” Punz says raggedly. He feels weak, leaning against the wall.

“Did you do it?”

“What?”

“Did you blow up L’Manberg?” Dream asks more forcefully.

“What the fuck— No! No, I didn’t fucking do it— I *died*. Twice,” Punz struggles to show his anger, shouting at Dream hoarsely. He hates that for a moment his own voice, weak and echoed, sounds too much like it belongs here, back in a cell alongside Wilbur and Tommy.

“Hm,” Dream seems to be mulling something over, unfazed and disinterested by Punz’s anger. “So, that’s it then, huh?” He definitely sounds amused. “No more civilization for you, Punz. Welcome to the club.”

Punz feels like he should continue to shout at Dream, this is in some way *his* fault surely, but Punz is so fucking tired. He's almost grateful he doesn't have to keep bickering to defend himself for failing.

"Great," Punz says dryly instead, a hand going to his throat again, the thin raised scar unsettling.

"And now you're down to one life. Just like the rest of us!" Dream almost sounds *gleeful*.

Punz has an unsettling notion crawl to the forefront of his mind, he watches Dream warily. Dream had never threatened him, not really. Maybe that had been because if Dream killed him, Punz would have respawned and come after him with the server in tow.

Now there is no such protection, not to mention his ability to go to the Mainlands unhindered was what had made him useful to Dream. Punz almost wants to leave right now, disappear before Dream decides he's not worth the trouble. The sunk-cost fallacy is a bitch of a motivator. Punz cannot give up now, not after everything he's done to get here.

"Well, not the end of the world," Dream shrugs. "We don't have to actually blow up L'Manberg to *tell* Tommy we did."

"...what?"

"I mean, that was the point. To hurt Tommy. Obviously."

"Yeah, you could lie about a lot of things," Punz scowls. "You gonna tell him all his friends are dead too?"

"No. No, he could confirm that. Maybe just... they got hurt," Dream shrugs.

"Why didn't we just lie to begin with then, huh? If it doesn't matter?"

Dream remains dismissive, "I mean, I *did* want it blown up. Now I'm just working around you messing up."

Punz doesn't want to deal with this, it feels almost disrespectful to his loss, but as always Dream doesn't seem to care.

And this is the only company you get to keep now. No more patrolling with Sapnap, no more being looked at like a friend, like the lone survivor in a sea of grief.

It's a loss, even if he wants to pretend it isn't.

"I've been trying to piss Tommy off, he's been stubbornly passive. It's annoying," Dream grumbles.

"You're... *mad* that he's not fighting you?" Punz scoffs. "Make up your fucking mind, will you?"

Dream pauses, hesitating. "It's more about ensuring long term... success."

Once again Punz finds there is something here he doesn't yet understand, something Dream will remain cryptic about until some miserable conclusion.

"Come on. You get Tommy, I get Wilbur. Lets take them to the main room, tell them you destroyed it," Dream continues, punching his arm lightly like they're in on the same joke.

"Why am I getting Tommy and you're getting Wilbur?"

"I mean, you just got back from two deaths, you're not at your best, and Wilbur is... well, a bit more rabid than Tommy. He's more likely to attack you for no reason. Right?"

Punz is still suspicious. "And what if they want proof?"

Dream laughs. "Not like it matters. If we tell them we don't care if they believe us, they'll just obsess over whether or not they should. I think explaining your death, blowing your cover, that kind of cost it'll be easier for them to believe bought something."

~

"Tommy?!" Wilbur's frantic voice reaches him through the wall. "Tommy, are you okay?! What happened?"

"Punz..." Tommy isn't sure how to explain, still fixating on the blood on the floor. "Punz came in here and died. And... and then left."

"Pardon?"

"Yeah. I dunno," Tommy says dully. "Maybe it's 'cause of something good happening, eh?"

"Yeah... maybe," Wilbur sounds as unconvinced as Tommy feels. "He... he gave you a book."

"What? Oh, yeah," Tommy stares down at it. He doesn't think it's fair that his hell now comes with homework. "Do you know why?"

"Why would I know?"

"I dunno. It feels like... like there's something, y'know?"

"...No?"

"Wil, what... what exactly did Dream *say*? What's got you so freaked out?" Tommy asks, tossing the book onto his bed vehemently.

"What'd you mean?"

"Just now, Wil! You were— You were fucking scared shitless, man."

"Tommy..."

"He's... I doubt he's fuckin' listening in right now. He's probably with Punz."

Wilbur is silent.

“What the fuck did he say to you, Wil? When have you *ever* been this self preserving or whatever the fuck?” Tommy snaps. He immediately regrets it. He presses his palms against his closed eyes, a headache forming. *You’ve changed too. Why the fuck can you judge him for it?*

“It’s not– It’s not like you think, man, he–”

The click of redstone silences Wilbur immediately.

“Fuck– *Fuck*–” Tommy mutters, shifting restlessly from foot to foot, he’d been so close of course Dream had to fucking interrupt now. Dickhead.

It’s not Dream. It’s Punz.

He’s still a mess of blood, pale and unsteady. He’s put his armor back on, but that doesn’t do much to hide it. Half the blood is on his chestplate. He also looks absolutely miserable.

“Come on, Tommy,” Punz nods him back toward the hall.

“What happened–”

“Shut up.”

“You *died*–”

Punz grabs him by the collar of his shirt and shoves him against the wall, leaving Tommy breathless. “I said shut up. You don’t talk about that shit– do you hear me?” He snaps. Tommy doesn’t look him in the eye, only at the blood staining his neck. It unnerves Punz a bit. He lets go. “Come on.”

Tommy follows him, quiet and gloomy, his back now sore from hitting the wall. Punz takes him out into the dome, and here he stops.

“What now?” Tommy asks dully, splashing the water. His feet always feel like fucking blocks of ice nowadays.

“Wait,” Punz says shortly. Of course. Punz doesn’t do shit. They’ll wait for Dream.

Dream returns, followed by Wilbur.

“Okay, now that we’re all here,” Dream claps. “Let’s chat.”

As with before, Tommy gravitates toward Wilbur. He believes they’re safer together; true or not, he’d rather be with his brother than without him. Wilbur doesn’t come closer, but he doesn’t stop Tommy either. Tommy doesn’t like the thought that Wilbur is trying to distance himself. They *need* each other.

“As I’m sure we’re all aware now, our dearest Punz here died recently,” Dream talks like he’s a fucking group counsellor, putting a hand over his chest as if concerned. “And I think it’s only fair you both know why that is.”

Punz shifts from foot to foot, arms folded across his chest, looking uneasy. Dream is waiting for Punz to explain. He doesn’t. Dream looks at him.

“This was your idea. I’ve already died for it, I’m not doing anything else,” Punz says bitterly.

“Aw, okay. If you wanna pout, sure, I’ll do it,” Dream says with mocking pity. He turns back to Tommy and Wilbur. “I mean, do you want to know what Punz was doing? I feel like you should. It’s... relevant to both of you.”

Tommy hates this. At least when he was first running through the jungle and dragging Wilbur behind him, he understood exactly the stakes and what was going to happen. The unknown makes it all worse.

“What’re you on about?” Tommy takes half a step back. Wilbur is close enough to brush shoulders with him, and Tommy thinks he feels him tense.

Dream laughs softly, clearly savoring this. “Guess I’ll just say it. Punz blew up L’Manberg.”

It’s like the air has turned electric, everyone in the room, save Dream, tenses like they’re expecting lightning.

“What?” Tommy says hoarsely. “What– No. You– It doesn’t make... it doesn’t make sense,” Tommy glances back to Wilbur, frantic, but Wilbur just seems frozen, watching Dream with weighted dread. Tommy turns back to Dream, to anyone to tell him this isn’t true. “You– You’re fucking lying. You wouldn’t– Why the fuck would you–”

Dream continues, patronizing and calm. “Tommy, why would I lie? I *told* you–”

“*No!* No, s-shut the fuck up! Y-You lying piece of shit, there’s no fucking way you–” Tommy shouts at him, going to step forward, but Wilbur grabs his arm, holding him back, but Tommy almost doesn’t even notice. This is the kind of terror mixed with fury that leaves Tommy desperate to destroy, not caring if he saves himself, not caring what gets caught in the crossfire, so he pushes. “You’re a *fucking liar!*”

Dream holds up a hand to silence him, a warning that shouldn’t be taken lightly. “Let me *finish*, Tommy. You already know I said I was going to hurt your little friends for that first escape, and now it’s come to a head–”

“I’ll kill you,” Tommy hisses. He feels like there’s a fire growing in his chest again, Dream doesn’t have the fucking *right*.

“Tommy, *please*–” Wilbur says desperately, holding onto him tighter.

Tommy doesn’t even pause to take a breath, he’s tried to protect Wilbur, he has, but maybe it’s because what Dream tells him is too familiar that he is beyond Wilbur’s influence. “You can’t– You ruin *everything*–”

“Um, don’t you want to know who got hurt?” Dream asks, teasing. His tone turns sharper, more punishing, “and I want you to shut up. Okay? You don’t get to throw a tantrum. If you keep that up... I’ll have to do something about it, okay?”

“*You shut the fuck up! Alright?! Because y-you have to be lying—*” Tommy tugs against Wilbur’s hold on him. *Everything* he did to keep them safe, to keep *all* of them safe, and Wilbur comes out here to join him, and apparently all the rest of them are paying for it too. It’s not fucking *fair*.

“Tommy— Tommy *please just stop!*” Wilbur is pleading with him now, desperate and terrified. “H-He doesn’t mean it, Dream, *please—*”

“Hey, they all *survived*. Maybe a canon death here and there, but nothing *final*. And it’s not like Tubbo wasn’t burned to begin with. I mean, Ranboo’s already got fucked up scars on his face, what’s a few more? I didn’t check to tally up everyone’s limbs, but maybe Niki will have someone who understands—”

“*You fucking bastard!*” Tommy screams, fighting free of Wilbur’s hold, doing whatever it takes to tear Dream to fucking pieces, but Wilbur holds onto Tommy for dear life. “*Why couldn't you just hurt me?! You're a fucking monster! You fucking coward— why didn't you just hurt me?!?*”

“I said shut up, Tommy,” Dream has his sword. He takes a step forward. No one would know it from behind a mask, but Dream isn’t looking at Tommy. He’s looking at Wilbur. “Or I’ll break you worse than I did the last time.”

Tommy is still screaming himself hoarse, unable to stop. After everything stolen from him, Dream *cannot* take L’Manberg from him. Or not from *him*, he already did that a long time ago, but take it away from everyone Tommy destroyed himself to protect. *Fury* is too simple a word for the unfairness clawing at his throat as any self control, any logic has left him. “*I’ll kill you! I’ll fucking kill you—*”

Wilbur steps between Dream and Tommy, just barely managing to push Tommy behind him. “*Please, Dream, please—*”

Dream doesn’t stop, and neither does Tommy, still a wave of furious chatter and a collision seems inevitable.

Wilbur turns back to look at him, pushing Tommy back a step. “Tommy just *shut up!*”

Tommy has a millisecond to register Wilbur’s face, an expression he’s at a loss to understand, and then Tommy gets hit.

Tommy falls silent, stumbling back, cheek stinging. He can taste blood. The moment slows to a crawl, not even enough time passing to draw breath but it feels like an eternity, Wilbur and Tommy staring at each other, Wilbur shaking, something wild and frantic behind his eyes, and Tommy looks hurt, a confused, quiet sort of pain like a kicked dog.

Punz steps forward in the same moment, acting the second he realizes what's happening, grabbing Wilbur's arm and throwing him to the floor, throwing him *away* from Tommy, standing between them, snapping, "Hey! Hey, that's *enough*. What the fuck are you playing at?!" And only then does Tommy understand.

Wilbur had hit him.

Tommy doesn't move. His left hand goes to his cheek, still stinging, an ache indicating a bruise to come, and he stares at the floor. He's too quiet. He's too calm, neither rage nor anguish, just a passive aching confusion that doesn't suit Tommy.

"Holy *shit*," Dream laughs, sword lowered. He sounds *impressed*. "Wow, Wilbur," he shakes his head. "You really... huh. I didn't think you had it in you."

Wilbur is on the ground, not bothering to get back up from Punz shoving him, looking a second away from being sick or breaking down into tears. He isn't looking at Tommy.

Tommy *is* looking at him. He's staring at that face, like he's looking for some tell that this isn't *real*. That shouldn't be his brother, but it is. His brother's hand is the reason why he's tasting blood. Tommy is vaguely aware through the fog that he wants to say something. He wants to shout at Wilbur, to ask him *why?* to ask him *how could you?* to ask him *did you mean to hit me that hard?* but he doesn't say a word.

He doesn't move either. He's stopped thinking about L'Manberg. All he's thinking about is how warm his skin feels as he cradles his own cheek. It burns. He's connecting things and then unconnecting them, over and over. It's Wilbur who hurt him, he's on the ground right there, he's on the ground because Punz pulled him away, Punz had done so because he hit Tommy. That is where the comprehension shorts out, because that's his brother, and his brother would never hurt him. *Dream* would. *Punz* would, so surely it was one of them instead, except it *wasn't*. It was just Wilbur.

"I think..." Dream says, poorly trying to mask delight, looking from Tommy to Wilbur. "I think that's enough excitement for one day. Come on, Tommy!" Dream grabs Tommy by the arm, pulling him back toward the hall, Tommy doesn't follow willingly at first, like always, he resists just long enough to get one last look at Wilbur, even if this time he isn't sure why.

Punz still stares down at Wilbur on the floor. He had pulled Wilbur away the moment he'd registered what he'd done, he'd thrown Wilbur to the ground, he'd placed himself between Wilbur and Tommy, and he cannot think of a logical reason for such a strong impulse.

"You're crazy, do you know that?" Punz snaps. "You're one fucked up bastard. What fucking rotted your brain so bad you—" Punz is almost at a loss for words. "He *cares* about you," is the best he can manage, spitting the words with vitriol.

Wilbur has some vague idea of a hundred retorts he could make. Punz has no right to be preaching to him, but Wilbur doesn't say a word. Mostly he's just trying not to cry right now. He can still see Tommy's face. Tommy has *never* looked at Wilbur like that.

Except he has. It's a memory Wilbur will never be able to place, too tiny a thing to notice, but Tommy had looked at him like that once. From the other side of a crater, in the same few moments as Phil putting a sword through his chest.

It's the look Tommy gave him the last time Wilbur willingly destroyed their relationship.

Punz is waiting for a reply, for an answer to make all of this somehow sane. It doesn't come. So he grabs Wilbur by the collar of his jacket and drags him to his feet. Wilbur is unresistant as Punz takes him down the hall.

Dream isn't especially harsh, guiding Tommy rather than pushing him along. He lets go, and Tommy just stands in the middle of the room, a hand cradling his cheek, staring at the ground, glassy eyed and out of focus.

"Tommy?" Dream asks carefully. "You okay?"

Tommy knows that voice. That's when Dream is playing the role of *friend*. Dream steps forward, going to put a supportive hand on his shoulder, but Tommy stumbles back, hitting the wall at the back of the cell, and curling up against it. He doesn't want anyone near him. He doesn't want to be touched. He doesn't want to *think* or *feel*. He doesn't want his brother to have hit him.

Dream keeps his distance. "I'm sorry, Tommy. That probably scared you, huh?" Whatever masquerade of sympathy he's giving is weak, it's like he's almost buzzing with a giddy, delighted energy.

But Tommy isn't even aware of that, he isn't listening.

"I'll bring you some food in a bit. Try to calm down, okay?"

Tommy *still* isn't listening. Dream's words pass right through him, meaningless. Tommy isn't really thinking anymore either. A numbness has set in.

"Okay," Dream sighs. He leaves him.

The door clicks shut. Tommy doesn't move.

Some amount of time passes in silence. Tommy doesn't know how long. Tommy is replaying it. Over and over, a split second burned into his mind. He doesn't know if the memory is accurate. None of it makes sense. Wilbur pushes him away, because Dream is advancing, but it's not Dream who acts. It's just not. It's Wilbur who shouts at him to *shut up!* and no matter how hard Tommy tries he cannot rewrite it.

Punz shoves Wilbur back into his cell, leaving without even a last scolding insult. Wilbur knows there is nowhere to go from here, there is nothing he can say short of throwing away the mercy that his own violence had wrought. The only thing that could fix this would bring far more hurt down on Tommy, Dream had been coming for Tommy, Wilbur had waited until the last second but undeniably that had been *the* moment, the threshold, the point of no

return, and Wilbur had crossed it. Wilbur speaks anyway. He doesn't know what else to do. "Tommy?" Wilbur's shaky voice reaches him through the bricks.

Tommy doesn't move. He remains in the corner of the cell, still cradling his cheek. He tries to focus on the sound of his own shaky breathing, not Wilbur's voice.

"Tommy, please. I— I am *so* fucking sorry, I am so sorry, I can't— oh *fuck*—" Wilbur is definitely crying. Tommy can hear it, however much he wishes he couldn't. "I'm so sorry—" Wilbur says it again. He keeps saying it.

Tommy doesn't reply. He doesn't listen. He swallows and the taste of blood spreads. Tommy hadn't had time to brace. Dream has definitely slapped him harder, but Tommy expects that. He doesn't try to resist and the force of the blow is usually weakened by Tommy stumbling back so easily, it's second nature to him.

But he hadn't expected it. He hadn't tried to move away from his brother, even when he knows what someone raising a hand toward him means, because it had been *Wilbur*. Wilbur would never hurt him. Tommy had cut the inside of his cheek against his own teeth because he didn't move with the blow. That's where the taste of blood is coming from. Tommy's chest feels very tight. He knows he's bound to start crying soon. He doesn't want to. He doesn't want any of this. He feels sick, a deep-rooted, disgusted horror reminiscent of the hazy suffering of watching himself bleed out from a nearly severed arm. This pain is worse. And part of that disgust rises from the horrible fact that for a moment, for *too long* a moment, he'd been guilty. He had felt shame because he must have done something to upset Wilbur, he must have done something wrong, something bad, to warrant Wilbur hitting him. Tommy hasn't even been that level of fucked up and brainwashed for *Dream* lately, so whatever that feeling was, it scares him.

Wilbur is at a loss. He'd kill himself if he could, but he knows it's not worth the effort. Tommy isn't answering. Not that he's expecting him to, it's more like he's praying. All Wilbur can do is press his forehead against the corner of the room that gets him closest to Tommy and continue a stream of prayers for absolution. Or not absolution, Wilbur does not deserve or want it. He just wants Tommy to know that he loves him. That he isn't alone. True or not, it feels like a cruel thing to offer, so Wilbur continues a mantra as useless as a dead man.

"I'm so sorry. You don't— You didn't deserve this shit and I am so fucking sorry and I wish I could protect you, Tommy, I wish I could—" Wilbur stops, stifling a sob. "But I *can't*." He's really falling to pieces now, words half mumbled and half wailed as he presses himself against the stone. "I can't and I'm *so* fucking sorry—"

And still, Tommy does not reply.

"I wish I could help you, I wish I hadn't fucking *done* that, but I had to— I *had* to, okay? And I'm so fucking sorry for it, I know you— You didn't deserve that, Tommy, and I—"

"You had to?" A steady reply, one Wilbur almost doesn't hear through the thin seam in the wall.

“W-What?” A pause, Tommy does not continue, so Wilbur does. “Yes– Yeah, I *had* to. And I know that’s not fucking fair–”

“You *had* to,” Tommy continues coldly. Tommy’s only solace is in the fact that he didn’t break entirely, he didn’t apologize, he didn’t ask Wilbur what he’d done wrong. It’s a weak consolation when that impulse remains in the back of his mind. He remains in the corner, curled against the wall, hand on his cheek, and gaze staring fixedly at the floor, consumed by nothing.

Wilbur waits for him to keep going, clinging to every word. He’d been scared Tommy might never speak to him again, maybe never speak at all, so even with Tommy’s icy tone Wilbur listens with desperate attention, pressing himself against the wall like somehow he can push through the stone and be back by his brother’s side, back in his good graces.

“...Why? What, because if you didn’t he was gonna hurt *you*? Is that it?” That cold rage wavers for a moment, Tommy’s voice trembling. Tommy is angry, even if it isn’t the loud, abrasive anger Wilbur was used to. He’s just a kid, and even in this nightmare, it all comes back to a boy who just wants to know why his big brother decided to be mean to him.

Wilbur stares at the darkness through the seam in the wall. He cannot give an honest reply. He can’t imagine Dream keeping himself away right now, and the thought of Dream, silent and eager, listening with bated breath to see if it’s his turn to play the monster, it’s more than enough to leave Wilbur speechless.

Tommy waits for Wilbur to say something, anything to save himself. He even looks up from the floor in Wilbur’s direction. He wants a better reason. There is nothing. So Tommy assumes the answer is yes, and his gaze returns to the ground, vision blurring with tears he can no longer hold back.

Wilbur stops talking. So does Tommy.

For the first time since his return, Tommy truly wishes Wilbur had never come back here. He still just wants his big brother to protect him. These two wants do not cancel each other out. They both remain, useless and cruel and unfulfilled.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, the chapter summary is below, but I also wanted to make it clear that I do not support cc!Dream or his actions. If you do support him, I ask that you do not engage with my work as I do not want you in my community. If you’re confused about what I’m referencing, [here is a post I made explaining somewhat](#).

I’ve always been a firm believer in separating content creator from character, and as such I will be completing this fic and continuing to write for the dsmp, but I also needed to acknowledge that this is a character created by a person who I do not want to support. Take care of yourselves, everyone <3

CHAPTER SUMMARY: (there is also an even shorter TL:DR at the bottom)

Dream gets Tommy and Wilbur together in the time before Punz's deaths and arrival, he tells Tommy he wants him to memorize the revive book. Throughout the conversation, he is making fun of Tommy, trying to goad him into acting out, but Tommy remains calm because he is still under the impression that Dream is looking for an excuse to hurt Wilbur. Wilbur hovers anxiously, instead hyper aware of Dream's full intentions.

Nothing comes of it. Dream sees Punz's cries for help on his comm and separates the two of them again. Punz enters, dies, and respawns.

Dream takes Punz back to the library, asking him if he blew up L'Manberg, uncaring that Punz clearly just got out of a bad fight. Punz shouts back that he didn't, instead he died, twice. Dream takes this well, first smugly welcoming Punz to the no-civilization club, as he can't go back to the Mainlands now. Punz is also now aware that Dream poses a much greater threat to him. Before, Dream couldn't attack Punz or push too far because Punz would just respawn in the mainlands and come after him with the whole server. But now Punz has no one to go to and no lives to spare. Dream decides they'll just lie and tell Tommy and Wilbur they blew up L'Manberg, it doesn't matter anyway. Dream just wants to push until he gets the reaction he wants.

Through the wall Tommy tries to get Wilbur to explain what's going on, noticing how strange he was acting, but before Wilbur can, Punz and Dream return and take them back to the main room. Here, Dream bluntly announces that Punz destroyed L'Manberg. Tommy's careful restraint to protect Wilbur shatters, he's shouting at Dream, cussing him out, going so far as to try to attack him even as Wilbur desperately tries to hold him back. Dream offers a warning, more for Wilbur than Tommy, and then he moves like he's going to hurt Tommy, so Wilbur hits him.

Tommy shuts down. Punz drags Wilbur away from Tommy. Dream is delighted. They're put back in their cells, Wilbur apologizing desperately and Tommy cold and disbelieving. Still, Wilbur doesn't fess up because then this will have been for nothing. The boys remain at odds.

TL:DR

Dream wants Tommy to memorize the revive book. Dream also knows Punz is down to one life. Dream lies and tells Tommy Punz blew up L'Manberg. Tommy freaks out, Dream threatens to punish him for it so Wilbur hits him. The two of them are at odds, Wilbur unwilling to explain the truth in case it makes things worse, and Tommy betrayed.

Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

CW: oh. so many. referenced suicide, referencing things from the last chapter, Tommy being mad at Wilbur, self harm, abuse (NOT between crime boys!!! that will always have a specific warning if it comes up again), heavy descriptions of injuries and gore, a lot of character death, dead bodies, claustrophobia, Dream's stupid god complex. I think that's all the specifics. Best of luck.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Punz leaves Wilbur and returns to the main room, there Dream paces, seeming almost giddy.

“Did you put Wilbur back?” Dream asks.

“What? Yeah, obviously—”

“Right, okay, cool,” Dream pushes past him and goes down the corridor a ways, here he pauses, searching the bricks carefully before placing down a lever.

“What the fuck are you—”

Dream shushes him sharply. “If you want to come with, you gotta promise me you’re gonna be totally silent, got it? Don’t even breathe too loud.”

Punz’s initial frustration and horror is traded for the same feelings for different reasons. “...Go where?”

Dream doesn’t reply, and Punz can imagine he’s smirking behind that mask.

“Aren’t you curious about the fallout?”

“Dream, *where?*”

“Come look, or don’t. But don’t make a sound, got it? Or do something stupid like get a torch out.” And with that, Dream pulls a lever and disappears into the wall.

Punz hesitates, staring at where he’d walked off, the narrow, dark corridor beyond the already narrow and dark corridor. Punz can’t help but wonder how many hidden rooms and passageways there are here.

He won’t be able to let go of this if he doesn’t follow Dream, just to see. He has to know. So he follows, into that narrow, dark corridor. Punz finds his way feeling along the walls. He has to crouch, he realizes, which is probably also how Dream spawn-proofed a completely

dark room. He hears voices. He also realizes what direction they're going in. They're going toward the cells.

Wilbur's hysterical voice reaches them clearly: *"I'm so sorry, you don't— You didn't deserve this shit and I am so fucking sorry and I wish I could protect you, Tommy, I wish I could—"*

Ahead of him he can barely see the dark outline of Dream, who presses against the wall, sitting on the floor. The corridor just ends here. Its sole purpose being to listen. Punz stops, staring at Dream, even as he can't see him. He feels sick.

"But I can't."

Punz hears Wilbur sob. He hasn't heard a word from Tommy yet.

"I can't and I am so fucking sorry I wish I could help you, I wish I hadn't fucking done that, but I had to— I had to, okay? And I'm so fucking sorry for it, I know you— You didn't deserve that, Tommy, and I—"

Tommy speaks and Punz almost jumps. He still stares at the space in the darkness where he knows Dream sits.

"You had to?"

Punz doesn't break the rule of keeping his silence, remaining transfixed by his disgust.

Wilbur replies, desperate still, and Punz buries a shudder at the thought that Wilbur's vulnerability is meant to be private, this is not theirs to witness. *"W-What? Yes— Yeah, I had to, and I know that's not fucking fair—"*

"You had to." Tommy is horribly cold. He's not as vulnerable as Wilbur but Punz knows he shouldn't be hearing this either way. There's a pause, it extends and Wilbur doesn't reply yet and Punz doesn't know what to do with himself. Punz still hasn't moved. Tommy speaks again. *"Why? What, because if you didn't he was gonna hurt you? Is that it?"*

Punz waits for Wilbur to reply. He doesn't, but Punz can still faintly hear that he is crying. Punz waits for Dream to move. He doesn't even as the minutes slip by and it seems clear the two brothers are done talking. Punz almost doesn't want to leave until Dream does. He keeps waiting and still, Dream sits there, giving no sign of moving. Punz thinks he might scream if he doesn't get out of there and while his impulse is to not leave Dream alone to his eavesdropping, he cannot bear it anymore. He slowly, carefully goes back down the dark corridor. He doesn't stop until he's back in the dome, breathing shakily, feeling like he'd just come up for air after a swim. Punz turns and waits for Dream to come back. It's not like he has anywhere else to go.

Punz jumps when Dream finally appears from the dark corridor. Dream raises his hands passively, amused by Punz's agitation.

"They didn't say anything else," Dream assumes Punz is staring at him because he's expecting an update of some sort.

“They didn’t—” Punz sputters. “What the *fuck*?”

“...what?” Dream sounds *genuinely* puzzled. That’s worse.

“What— You’re fucking insane. You do realize that, don’t you? You’re creeping in the walls *listening in on their conversations*?! To what fucking end, Dream?! What do you *expect* me to think?” Punz snaps, stepping closer, gesturing furiously, but it’s all useless. There’s nothing he can do here. He certainly won’t be able to change Dream’s mind on the immorality at hand, let alone stop him.

Dream sighs heavily, leaning against the wall. “I know you’ve had a rough day. I can see you’re mad for... a *lot* of reasons, but this is *really* the thing you’re taking issue with? No moral crises about the violence? *This*?”

Punz cannot defend himself by saying he finds the violence immoral too without being an even bigger hypocrite than he is already. So he says nothing, and Dream continues.

“I had to make sure they weren’t... you know, *conspiring*,” Dream shrugs.

“Right, right conspiring, after what just happened? Fucking hell—”

“You never know,” Dream says cockily.

Punz is still at a loss. “This is... this is all just *fun* to you, isn’t it? It’s just a game, and you get to creep around and watch the fallout. Fuck immortality so long as you make Wilbur Soot cry, right?” Punz says dryly.

“That makes me sound so *petty*,” Dream whines. “It’s more... curiosity. Like I said before. I’m a... *scientist* first, before I’m a...”

“Raging psychopath?”

Dream laughs. “No, I would say there’s overlap with scientist there. *Before* I’m... in it for fun.”

Punz is no less put off. He cannot run himself ragged overthinking this. It won’t get them any further. “Okay. *You* had ideas. For revival. And you said you’d give me a few copies. I didn’t blow up L’Manberg, but I sure as hell tried. And you’re welcome to finish the job. But I think you still owe me *something*.”

“Hm,” Dream mulls it over. “I’m not gonna give you any copies, because you fucked up, but sure. I’ve already started working on it. I’m going to get Tommy to memorize the revive book.”

This does not assuage Punz’s irritation either. “Why the hell would you give him that?! What if—”

“What if he finds a way to burn it?” Dream interrupts. “It doesn’t *matter* anymore, Punz. Even if he *could* find a way to burn it, XD isn’t showing up. That’s not a way out for him anymore.”

Punz allows his pettier, more personal protestation out. “You’re letting *him* memorize it, then, but not me?”

“Yes, Punz. But also, you don’t *want* to memorize it. Like, even *I* don’t have it memorized. That thing is *so* fucking long, I just use copies.”

“So why are you so sure he’ll be able to?”

“Eh, I’m not. But it’s not like he has a choice. He’ll have to figure it out, or pay for it. And like, yeah I gave it to Tommy and not you, because if I’m being honest, I don’t need my knowledge of the revivebook to remain secret to... *convince* Tommy. You can’t blame me for not giving up my one negotiating tool I have with you, right?” Dream *is* honest, even logical. Punz still hates it. Dream laughs, “trust me, I don’t think you want me to try my methods for Tommy on you.”

Punz bristles at the threat. “Meaning?”

Dream shrugs, swaggering back toward the corridor. “Meaning *nothing*. If it makes you feel better, after they stew in their misery for a bit longer, I’m gonna go bring Tommy some food, try to nudge him in the right direction, get him to work memorizing the book.”

“And what about me?”

Dream pauses, “I didn’t think you needed my orders for every little thing. Do what you want.”

“No, I meant— What’s your plan here, Dream? Why are you giving Tommy the book, then?” Punz pushes.

Dream laughs softly. “All will be revealed in time, Punz.”

Punz is all the more irritated by his pretentious and evasive exit, but there’s nothing else for him to do except wait for Dream to offer him something.

Tommy flinches when the door opens. He hasn’t moved from his corner wedged between the wall and his bed. He knows it isn’t any safer than any other corner of the room, but it’s comforting to feel like he’s hiding behind something. Tommy’s face feels warm, in part because his hand has been pressed to his cheek where Wilbur had hit him almost nonstop.

“Hey, Tommy,” Dream says. His tone is still friendly. “I brought you some food. Sorry you can’t have free range in the base, it’s not that I don’t trust *you*, I just don’t trust Wilbur. And it wouldn’t be fair to let one of you go but not the other, y’know?”

Tommy doesn’t say a word, just stares icily at Dream like he can banish him by doing so. He wants to be left alone.

“I’m gonna come sit across from you, okay?” Dream says. It’s the illusion of caring about his boundaries that he says this, but it’s not like he asks for Tommy’s permission to approach. He doesn’t *actually* care what Tommy wants. Dream sits across from him, a meter between them. “Here,” he offers a wooden bowl. Tommy doesn’t move, keeping his knees

tucked into his chest. He's hungry, he still doesn't want it. Dream nods, offering it a little closer, insistent. Tommy still refuses and it's like he can see Dream resist the urge to throw the food on the floor. Dream keeps up his peaceful facade instead. "Alright, well, whenever you want it, it's here," he places it on the floor in front of Tommy.

There's silence, Dream thinking if he waits long enough Tommy might break it first. Tommy doesn't. There was a time when he would have, when silence lasting this long would almost feel painful, but not anymore.

"You know, it could've been a lot worse, Tommy," Dream eventually says. "I mean, imagine if he'd broken a bone. It would still be hurting right now. I mean, it wasn't *too* bad, right? It was just a slap. I know how weak Wilbur is, that was nothing."

He's goading him now. He wants Tommy to rant and rave that it's so much fucking worse than *just a slap*, but Tommy isn't going to give him the satisfaction of seeing how wounded he is. He doesn't have the fucking right to his pain.

Dream sighs. He reaches toward Tommy, and at least gets a bit of satisfaction that Tommy is reactive enough to flinch away, knees tucked tighter into his chest, watching Dream's hand like a nervous animal. Dream just reaches past him, grabbing the revive book from where Tommy had tossed it onto his bed.

"You know, I bet this would be a good distraction. Maybe you should get to work memorizing it, so you don't have to think about what Wilbur did. It'll eat you alive otherwise, right?" Dream is still really leaning into that *oh I just want to help* act and it's pissing Tommy off even more.

"So, are you? Are you gonna start working on it? 'Cause when I gave this to you, first off it was a *gift*, you *should* feel honored, but it also wasn't a request. You should start figuring it out. Eventually, I'll test you, see if you've actually memorized it, and there will be consequences if you haven't." Dream again waits for a reply that isn't coming. Dream grows more irritated and sharp. "I think if you're going to keep giving me the silent treatment this might call for some more tough love." He stands, and Tommy both flinches back against the wall, as if trying to sink into it, and stares up at Dream, unblinking and more wary than afraid. "I want you to fill up every book in that chest by tomorrow night, or... I haven't decided what yet, but there *will* be consequences. Maybe I'll chain you to a desk so you'll *have* to do it. Or I'll start breaking fingers on your left hand, remind you that you being able to write at all is because of *my* mercy."

Tommy still looks more irritated than afraid.

"Or I'll break Wilbur. How about that, huh?"

Now Tommy reacts. "You think *I'd* fucking care—" He snaps hoarsely.

"Are you telling me you don't?" Dream says it like a challenge, in the same breath he sounds too triumphant, like getting Tommy to break his silence is a victory. Maybe it is.

This time Tommy's silence speaks for itself. He does care. He cares so badly and he hates himself for it.

"Yeah. That's what I thought," Dream says smugly. "I mean I can make sure it'll screw you over too. Break his leg, so next time it rains, I'll chain you two together in the jungle and good fucking luck getting out of there then. You should just do what I said, Tommy. Dunno why you always try to make shit harder for yourself."

Dream waits again. He sighs. "Look, I understand why you're upset, but really, Tommy, you signed up for this. Remember? I literally gave you a way out. What did you think would happen? You didn't think Wilbur would protect you, did you? It's *Wilbur*."

And with that, Dream leaves him, the click of redstone and the door locks behind him. Tommy doesn't know what of that Wilbur might have heard. He doesn't say anything now, and Tommy's glad for that. Wilbur, no matter what he might have to say on the matter, should keep his mouth shut if he knows what's good for him.

So why is Tommy waiting for his brother to speak? For a sarcastic, *well, that was pleasant*, or even a more desperate *don't do what he wants for my sake, you don't need to do that*, but there is nothing.

So Tommy grabs the bowl and tears into the fish Dream had brought him voraciously. He briefly considers if fish bones could work as a weapon, but he doesn't even think he could kill *himself* on the tiny things, so it's not worth it. Regardless, food helps. It's not enough food, and he's still hungry, but considerably less so. He also considers it a good sign that he's not so starved that he doesn't get hungry anymore. He stares at the locked door spitefully, before a nagging anxiety grows louder.

You're on the clock. You've got a lot of writing to do.

"Fuck..." Tommy gets up and grabs an empty book before setting the revive book down in front of him open to the first page. He spends too long staring at the unintelligible runes before he starts writing. He has no fucking clue how he's supposed to memorize a script he doesn't even know, but he has his ultimatum. He doesn't have a choice.

It's easier than getting caught in his own head, but as the hours begin to pass and his hand begins to protest the constant writing, the scent of ink meaningless, his hands stained with it, on the fourth or fifth book things get blurry. His thoughts begin to wander and there's nothing good to find.

Tommy was wrong. He thought Wilbur would never hurt him, but that isn't true. Wilbur *has* hurt him before, but he's never *hit* him.

Wilbur must, to some extent feel comfortable hurting Tommy, because he'd killed himself. He'd blown up L'Manberg. Tommy knows this. And knowing this almost makes the betrayal settle in his chest, but it doesn't, not really. Instead part of that pain now comes from regret. He should've known better.

He wouldn't go so far as to think Wilbur doesn't love him. Tommy knows that he does. And of course that doesn't offer him fucking solace, instead it only deepens the wound. Tommy snaps the quill he's holding. He numbly tosses it aside and grabs another. The ink staining his hands covers up the welts from holding the quill so long. Tommy wants to give up. He wants to stop doing this. He fears the consequences.

He will say by now, sometimes he can finish a page of the sigils with only a few glances at the original. It irritates him to know Dream's *write until you die* methodology of memorization seems to be working.

Tommy tries something. The first thirty pages or so are as correct as he can manage, and then somewhere in the middle he starts writing other things.

Dickhead.

A mess of sigils.

You're a little bitch.

More sigils.

I hope you die.

More sigils.

I hope you die I hope you die I hope you die I hope you die I hope you die I hope you die I hope you die I hope you die I hope you die I hope

Tommy stops once he realizes he's almost filled the page. Shit.

He finishes off with the correct sigils and continues. It would be nice if the magic or whatever that made resurrection possible could take his little annotations into account.

The blister on the side of his middle finger bursts and begins to bleed. He takes a break, pacing the room, his legs sore, his eyes aching.

He also remembers something.

Dream and Punz had summoned XD with a revive book. That was how he'd gotten away last time.

"Holy fuck..." He stares at the dozen or so copies scattered around him now. There's just one problem: He needs a way to make them burn. Tommy stands and paces and has a mad thought. "Hey W—" He stops himself. He shouldn't want to talk to Wilbur, but if it's a way to get out of here... "Wilbur."

It takes a moment for him to reply and Tommy is irritated by how hopeful he sounds.

"...yeah?"

“Do you... do you have your lighter?” Tommy is trying to figure out other factors. There’s no way Wilbur could pass him the lighter, the only thing Tommy can think of would be verbally telling Wilbur the book symbol by symbol, but he doubts that would work either, not to mention Dream listening in and stopping them.

“No. I’m sorry Tommy, I think they probably took it when they searched me,” Wilbur says every word with a pathetic eagerness. “Why do you ask?”

“Never mind why it doesn’t fucking matter,” Tommy snaps, frustrated, kicking one of the books across the room.

“Okay. That’s– That’s fine,” Wilbur continues to be pathetic.

“Did you get food?” Tommy asks before he can stop himself.

“Did I– Oh, yeah. I... I got some kind of fish, ages ago,” Wilbur says every word so carefully.

“Did Dream talk to you?”

“No. No, it was Punz, he just opened the door, threw it my way and left.”

Tommy scowls. His anger only grows louder. Not only at the fact that he feels like he’s Dream’s pet fucking hamster and Wilbur is Punz’s, but Punz’s audacity to be angry with Wilbur too. “I don’t need Punz fuckin’ acting all righteous for me. And I don’t need him protecting me neither.”

“Well, someone should be,” Wilbur says bitterly.

“Yeah, and whose fucking fault is that?” Tommy snaps. It has less power as a dig when he and Wilbur are both scolding the same person.

“It’s mine. It’s my fault.”

“Stop trying to act like you’re fucking sorry. It doesn’t change *anything*,” Tommy wants to hit his brother right back. How *dare* he act ashamed of himself.

“Right...” Wilbur remains so defeated it only infuriates Tommy further.

“I fucking *hate* you!” Tommy shouts at him with an intensity that startles himself. Silence. Wilbur does not reply. Tommy doesn’t continue. He curls up on top of his bed and covers his face with his hands. He will *not* allow himself to cry loud enough that Wilbur hears. He doesn’t want to say he hates his brother, he doesn’t want to in some way mean it. He wants his brother to help him. *I’m really scared, Wil. I don’t know what to do but I’m so tired and it isn’t fucking fair. I want you to protect me but right now you’re what’s hurting me the most.* Tommy shuts his eyes tightly and tries to bury a sob.

Wilbur wants to keep pleading with Tommy, at the very least reply with *you’re quite right to. You should hate me. I’m a monster and I know that*, but he doesn’t say a word. Tommy

doesn't deserve to be burdened with his self loathing. Instead he will drown himself in it instead.

I fucking hate you!

The raw pain in Tommy's voice cuts into Wilbur like a knife, but he holds onto it, he lets those words replay in his mind over and over again. Maybe it should offer some small comfort that Wilbur knows he's saved his brother from further harm, but it doesn't. If he allows himself to spiral deeper into questions of what Dream might have done when he stepped toward Tommy if Wilbur hadn't acted... all it will be is a never ending spiral of horror over what could still very well happen. This isn't a one time thing. If Wilbur doesn't continue, all of this will have been for nothing.

You do realize what that means, don't you? It means you're going to have to hit him again. Are you capable of that?

I mean you didn't think you were capable of it the first time, and here we are.

"Fuck..." Wilbur says hoarsely, burying his head in his hands.

Tommy doesn't continue. There's still maybe eight books which lay empty, but he's so *tired*. He knows time passes because his hunger worsens, but he doesn't try. He wants to give up, but he still cares enough for fear to return when Dream does.

"Tommy," Dream says scoldingly, staring at the mess of books littering the floor. "Why're you resting when I can see empty books?"

Tommy sits up, he hates that he feels guilty. "I don't..." His voice is hoarse, it's too quiet. He tries again. "I don't know. Got tired, I guess." He feels nauseous now, which does nothing to combat the hunger. His mind feels foggy, but he still tries to remember the threats Dream made the day prior.

"Y'know, you'd think you would've stopped being lazy by now, Tommy," Dream sighs. "Okay, it looks like you did *some* of it. And I'm feeling generous. I'll give you another chance. Finish filling out the rest of the books in the next, say, five hours. I won't punish you or Wilbur."

"Five hours, that's not enough—" Tommy replies, surprise and helplessness leaving him without a filter; Dream rewards him with a harsh slap, backhanding him across the face, a metal ring cutting into his cheek. Tommy struggles to sit back up, disoriented, vision dotted with stars. He doesn't know what he expected.

"Hm, even *Wilbur* couldn't teach you not to talk back, huh?" Dream tuts him. "See, I told you Wilbur slapping you was nothing. Unless you've already forgotten how much worse it could get."

Tommy says nothing, wincing, dabbing at the bloody scratch, staring at the ground at Dream's feet.

“How have you not caught on by now? I knew you were stupid, but it’s almost impressive at this point. I ask you to do something, I give you a *very* kind second chance, your only reply should be *yes Dream, thank you for giving me second a chance, Dream*, not this ungrateful bullshit. Are we clear?” Now Dream is expecting a reply.

Tommy nods.

“We *just* went over this, Tommy. Or have I still not knocked enough sense into you?”

Tommy looks Dream in the eye, hatred simmering over. He won’t give Dream the fucking excuse to go any further. He spits blood and smiles. “Yes, Dream. Thank you for giving me a second chance, Dream.”

Dream laughs. *All* of this is just for his fucking amusement. “Better. I’ll be back in five hours. And if you finish, maybe I’ll feed you, okay? You could’ve had food now if you hadn’t fucked up.”

Tommy chose not to continue, but he’s still fucking annoyed with himself. He’s so hungry it’s making him even dizzy and that will *not* make trying to quickly write in a bunch of books fun for the next hours. He nods, before remembering. “Yes, Dream.”

“Get to work.”

Dream leaves him.

Tommy doesn’t move at first, spitting more blood on the floor. It’s still covered in blood, still sticky from the dampness in the air, from Punz’s death. Wilbur’s slap had stopped hurting. Not anymore. He knows Wilbur wasn’t the one to hit him that time, it’s Dream’s violence compounding on a much smaller wound, but he can’t help but blame Wilbur in part too. *He* started this pain, Dream merely made it worse.

“T-Tommy?” Wilbur dares to speak first. He couldn’t resist. He’d heard Dream hit him. He knows if he had been in the room with him, Dream would have expected him to do it or he would’ve hurt Tommy far worse. He hates that the best thing he can do for his brother right now is stay away from him.

Tommy wants to scream at him again. He almost holds back, knowing saying nothing would wound Wilbur more, but he’s not doing shit for Wilbur, he doesn’t even deserve the worth that Tommy’s targeting would warrant. “*Shut the fuck up!*” He shouts at the wall with as much vitriol as he can muster, grabbing one of the books and throwing at the wall between them.

Wilbur obliges, and Tommy doesn’t feel better.

Tommy’s breathing is shaky, but he does not plan on fucking crying again like a little bitch. So instead he grabs one of the books and starts to write. He stops immediately. The blisters on his hand are agonizing now. He cannot write with his left hand, even if he had all of his fingers. He has to work through it. Tommy fumbles with his sleeve, inhaling sharply when even the fabric brushing against the burst blister hurts, but maybe it’s enough padding that he

can continue. He's hungry and exhausted and as always *cold*, but he has to do this. The next five hours are not going to be pleasant.

Tommy has no way to keep track of time, but even without fighting through painful blisters and fatigue filling out the rest of these books in a fucking quarter of the time is near impossible, so as time passes and he realizes he is *not* writing fast enough, he grows more frantic. He's getting blood all over the books. He keeps going, whining when his hand stiffens so badly he simply cannot hold a quill anymore.

"Fuck, fuck fuck fuck fuck—" Tommy shakes out his hand, but even that motion hurts. He stands and paces, going to the basin of water. The water is always cold. That might help.

Tommy runs his right hand under the water until his fingers are numb, first it burns horribly, but then the pain fades. He keeps writing, holding his right hand with his left in a feeble effort to give it more support.

"Hurts as bad as a fuckin' broken finger..." he mutters.

He hasn't noticed it, not really, but he's rarely checking the original book now. He's just focused on writing fast, and that means trusting his memory more. For all he knows these books are riddled with mistakes, but he actually doesn't think so. He's been obsessing over that book off and on for over 36 hours now. His eyes hurt. His head hurts even more. He's so frustrated he wants to cry.

He knows this would have hurt less if he'd had Wilbur to talk to. But he doesn't have Wilbur.

There were about eight books left now. Tommy takes about two hours per book. What Dream has asked of him is *literally* impossible. Tommy has no fucking clue why Dream is having him do this. He could literally use the anvil and an ink-press to make a few copies before he'd have to write a new one. Tommy is still crying a bit, mostly from pain now. He's getting scared he's reaching a point where his hand will just stop working for him. His handwriting has gotten sloppier, the last book Tommy knows is missing several pages just because his lettering got so messy he ran out of room. Now he's taking ten seconds to write a single letter because it's the steadiest his hand can get.

Dream *had* to realize he couldn't do this. All that bullshit about giving Tommy a *second chance* was just that— bullshit.

Tommy is *still* writing, his hand bloody and painful, when the door opens again. He's managed to get through almost five books in five hours, an *incredible* feat, and that he knows isn't enough. There are three which remain empty, and Dream will hurt him for it.

"Please, please I'm— I'm almost there, I c-couldn't there wasn't enough time—" Tommy says frantically, still trying to write. The lettering is a nightmare of trembling lines, but he's still trying.

Dream stands in front of him. He sighs. "Don't make *excuses*, Tommy. You could at least try to be mature and own up to your failures."

“But it’s *literally impossible!*” Tommy is almost screaming, voice trembling and hysterical. He breaks the quill he’s holding, the feathers already in tatters and matted from his blood. The constant writing has eroded a line through Tommy’s skin where he’d held the quill, it’s rubbed raw, the skin simply gone from that place, feather barbs sticking to the open wound painfully.

“Okay, fine. Well, then I guess you don’t eat, huh?” Dream is unfazed by Tommy’s panic. “Proud of you for trying, Tommy. And since you clearly tried,” he motions to Tommy’s bloodied hand. “I won’t hurt you for failing. I mean, obviously I won’t reward you either, so. I think the pain will be a good lesson, from the hunger and your fucked up hand.”

Tommy nods cradling his injured hand. He expected as much. He almost wants to ask if he’s allowed to stop, just to make sure, but he feels like if he does Dream will tell him to finish the last books just because he can, and at this point Dream coming back later to beat him for not finishing the job sounds less painful than the thought of writing again.

“Just give me what you have done, and I’ll check your work,” Dream holds out his hand expectantly.

Tommy pales. He has no idea which books have his furious little insults tucked between the pages. He knows Dream won’t read all of them, lazy bastard won’t be bothered, but he’ll probably check a few at random. Tommy gathers the books off the floor, scrambling, hands trembling, giving up on even trying to pick things up with his right, and handing them to Dream. He’d filled up maybe a little over a dozen books in the past 40 hours.

“Thank you,” Dream says cheerfully. He ruffles Tommy’s hair, Tommy shuddering and stepping back when he does, shoulders hunched inward. “Come on, I think you might like this part too. It’ll be cathartic.” Dream turns, nodding for Tommy to follow him out into the corridor.

Tommy hesitates. He doubts he’ll like whatever it is that comes next, but he knows he cannot avoid it by hiding out here. He follows, stopping short when Dream goes to Wilbur’s room.

“Wilbur, come with me,” Dream unchains Wilbur’s wrist, holding onto it tightly for a moment. “You’re not going to fight me, right, Wilbur? If you do, everything you’ve done so far will be worthless,” Dream offers a dangerous warning, one Wilbur clearly takes to heart with the way he spares a single glance at Tommy in the doorway before quickly looking away, nodding. Dream lets go. “Good.”

He turns and walks toward Tommy, who presses himself against the wall of the corridor past the doorway to Wilbur’s room so Dream can walk past him. Tommy follows. He hears Wilbur enter the corridor behind him and walks a little faster. He doesn’t want Wilbur to think he can act like he used to, put a hand on his shoulder, try to shield him, before Wilbur reminding him of his presence had been a comfort. Now the thought makes him almost nauseous. Dream turns into the dome and Tommy wants to ask where Punz is. He doesn’t know why. Punz wouldn’t stop Dream from doing whatever he has planned, maybe just to see Punz’s face, the confused horror, the hesitation to help. Wilbur will likely loudly express his horror and that only pisses Tommy off more.

Shit, does Tommy *prefer* Punz to Wilbur right now? He can't. Punz has hurt him way worse than Wilbur has. But Punz hasn't broken his trust in the same way.

"Wilbur," Dream snaps his fingers and points to the middle of the room like he's directing a dog. "And Tommy, just stay out of the way."

Wilbur obeys, tense and wired like a spring, but Wilbur isn't protesting because it seems that Dream's attention will stay on him instead of Tommy. Dream takes out his crossbow. Wilbur takes one step back as he sees it raised in his direction. That's as far as he gets before there's a bolt through his skull and he falls back into the water with a splash.

"Will!" Tommy shouts his name before he can stop himself, having half a mind to run to his brother's side, but he'd died in an instant.

"Come on, Tommy, pull yourself together. You're not actually *surprised*, are you?" Dream says mockingly. He pulls out one of the books Tommy copied from his inventory. He places a cauldron in the center of the room and fills it with lava.

Tommy could've figured it out for himself, but he's not exactly thinking especially clearly after the past hours, but now it's clear. Wilbur is going to be the guinea pig for Tommy's handiwork.

The book burns, and Tommy watches the hole in his brother's head close, the bolt pushed from the wound by rehealing brain matter. Wilbur gasps, eyes no longer glassy and instead frantic. He sits up sharply, a hand going to his face, wiping away blood that hasn't even had time to dry.

"Alright, one down. Not too bad, Tommy," Dream praises him, loading another bolt into his crossbow. Wilbur doesn't protest or try to move, he just shuts his eyes tightly and waits. Dream obliges, and Wilbur hits the ground with another crossbow bolt through the eye. "Actually, why don't you make yourself useful, I'll revive him, you reload—" Dream almost offers Tommy his crossbow, and Tommy almost reaches out to take it. Dream laughs. "Holy shit, you *actually* thought I was gonna trust you with my crossbow! Aw, your persisting naivete is *adorable*, reminds me of when you actually thought you could trust your big brother," he jeers. "Still, don't be fucking useless— And this'll be good practice! I'll do the shooting, you do the reviving," Dream returns his books to him.

Tommy is left staring at Wilbur's body, hovering over the cauldron, the heat stinging his wounded hand and also a relief from the cold.

"Well? Earth to Tommy, are you gonna do it? All you've got to do is burn it, and think about wanting Wilbur back. You're capable of that, aren't you?"

Is he?

Tommy's hands are shaky, but at least his task is easy. He tosses the book into the lava, and stares at Wilbur's body. He doesn't want him here, but he at the very least does *not* want his brother alone in his limbo. Tommy feels a rush of energy, like he'd accidentally given

himself an electric shock, and then he watches as his whims bring his brother back from the dead.

Holy shit.

Wilbur takes one deep breath and there's another bolt, this one cutting through the roof of his mouth from the angle of him laying on his back. Tommy burns the next book, and Wilbur breathes again, breathes and dies. The cycle continues. He knows how exhausting a resurrection can be, and over and over like this, he knows the exact headache Wilbur must be feeling, blinding, splitting pain from bolt after bolt piercing his brain, but it doesn't last long until he dies again, revived back to the pain, and so on and on. All of Tommy's hours of work gone up in flames, these resurrections existing only to prove Tommy's capabilities.

Tommy burns one of the books and Wilbur remains on the ground. He doesn't know if it was one of the more recent ones where he ran out of room from his handwriting, or somewhere in the middle where he scribbled a few bitter insults between the runes, but regardless, it fails.

"Hm," Dream sounds so neutral. It makes Tommy more scared, as he looks away from the lava back to him, weighted with trepidation. "Don't look so worried, Tommy. I would expect a few failures at least from you. Being a fuck up is what you're best at, right? I can spend all the time in the world trying to fix that part of you, but sometimes things just slip through the cracks. Don't feel so bad about it." Dream's reassurance is both a genuine relief and infuriating. At least Dream isn't going to punish him for it. "Try the next one."

Tommy obliges, and Wilbur gets two gasps for air in before Dream shoots him again, this time the bolt piercing his chest. Wilbur, already in pain from the repeated resurrections, is too weak to even struggle from his place on the ground, hands clawing uselessly at the water around him, breathing harsh and wheezing, before finally enough blood fills his lungs that it chokes up out of his nose and mouth. He's not looking at Tommy, or at Dream, just staring up at the dome. Tommy understands it. Dying in this room isn't too bad of a place. Even with a slow death, he could focus on the glow squids drifting above the glass.

"Oops," Dream says with far too much satisfaction.

Tommy is incredibly aware that Dream gave Wilbur a slower death since one of Tommy's books failed. That can't be helped now. Tommy cannot correct mistakes he wrote hours ago, Wilbur will just have to endure and Tommy will do his best not to break down over the sight of his brother drowning in his own blood.

Finally, Wilbur stops moving.

"Tommy?" Dream waits expectantly.

"R-Right- Dream, some of them- I k-know some of them won't work, 'cause my handwriting got too big so t-they're missing pages, so if I could just toss those now, no point in--"

"No," Dream says simply. "I want you to try them all."

Tommy nods shakily before burning the next one. It works, and Wilbur is rewarded with a single breath and a crossbow bolt between his eyes. A quick death.

The next book is a dud, then the next working, and as such Wilbur gets a bolt so far off it's basically in his shoulder, so Dream has to come up beside him, first stepping on the wound in his shoulder, Wilbur's scream is weak, shaken by a sob, and sharply cut off by Dream ripping out the bolt from the wound, and replacing it through Wilbur's eye. It doesn't take long for him to die then, but slower than if he'd been shot there. Slow enough that Tommy's knees go weak and he grabs onto the edge of the cauldron to keep himself standing before quickly pulling away as his fingers are burned by the hot metal.

"Tommy?" Dream asks again with the same calm, cheerful inflection, this lengthy ordeal means nothing to him, even as it drags on agonizing second by agonizing second for Wilbur and Tommy.

Still, Tommy obliges and tries the next book. It's a dud, and Tommy realizes he's finally begun to cry, but there's nothing he can do but burn the next book and hope the last of them all work so Wilbur can die easy. Tommy only looks at the lava now. He doesn't look to Wilbur. He knows looking at him will offer no comfort, so he lets the lava blind him and ignores the sounds of his brother dying slow again. Tommy stares at the book in his hands and realizes something through the fog of his horror.

Wilbur is still alive right now— awfully, monstrosly alive— but that means if he burns a book, and there is no one to revive, then—

Heart racing, Tommy quickly burns the book.

Please. Please, come save us. Please. If you save us I will devote myself to you I will do whatever you want, please just save us—

There's a sharp fizzle of static in the air, like standing a few leagues off from a lightning strike, and then nothing. Tommy looks around frantically. He doesn't remember feeling anything like this last time, there had been nothing, and then XD had been there.

"Tommy?" Dream speaks again, more cautiously now. He has stopped stepping on the hole he'd dug in Wilbur's chest, and Tommy hopes that means Wilbur is finally dead, but he knows Dream must have realized what he'd been trying to do.

Tommy doesn't understand. XD hasn't shown. He still stares around the dome hopelessly, his last copy of the book at his side. It hadn't been a dud, it had been different, Tommy had *felt* its power just dissipate uselessly, because XD was not summoned. *Nothing* was summoned. Nothing happened.

Tommy knows he's going to pay for this, he can only hope Wilbur will get to rest for a moment while it happens.

It's a desperate, foolish effort, but Tommy tries lying. "Sorry, I... I lost track of— of the dying," Tommy says hoarsely, even as it's abundantly clear he's still looking for XD. He

flinches when Dream puts a hand on his shoulder, a hand covered in Wilbur's blood, still fresh and hot as it soaks into Tommy's shirt.

"Tommy," Dream sighs, as if disappointed. "Did you *really think* I'd let you memorize the book if it meant XD would show up? He's *gone*, Tommy," Dream says softly. "I'm the only God you have left."

Tommy nods, swallowing thickly, not bothering to brush away quiet tears, his shaky breathing a substitute for begging for mercy he knows won't be offered.

"Why don't you burn that book, Tommy. Get Wilbur back with us," Dream says gently.

Tommy nods again. "I d-don't..." His voice is weak, barely above a whisper.

"What? You don't what, Tommy?" Dream still sounds too *kind*.

"I don't really w-want him to come back, s-so, I dunno if it'll..." he trails off weakly.

"I think you should try for me, Tommy, because if you just wasted the only other copy you have on *nothing*, and this last one is a failure," Dream sighs. "Let's just hope it isn't a failure, okay?"

Tommy thinks this is one of the earlier copies, it should be correct, but he *needs* to want Wilbur to come back, he needs the revival to work. He doesn't want Wilbur to come back because he's terrified of the consequences Dream will unleash on him for what Tommy has just done, but he'll do that anyway, and he'll do worse if Tommy cannot bring him back now. So Tommy burns it. He's swallowed by relief at the sound of Wilbur gasping for air, coughing up the blood remaining in his throat, somewhere between hyperventilating and sobbing. Tommy still doesn't look at him. Wilbur had endured maybe ten successful resurrections in the past hour, and ten deaths of varying levels of agony. Tommy doesn't know how to look at him knowing he'd had a hand in it.

"Huh," Dream laughs under his breath. "Lucky break," he pats Tommy on the back. "You know what, I was gonna give you a little more time, a little more practice, but you seem *confident*, Tommy. So confident you were just burning the books whenever you felt like it, huh?" Dream leaves his side and returns to Wilbur, who doesn't even try to move away at his murderer's approach.

Tommy doesn't know what's going to happen now, so he turns back around and watches as Dream puts the lava in a bucket and the cauldron in his inventory.

"Come with me, Wilbur," Dream says.

Wilbur doesn't move from the floor, still breathing raggedly.

"Did you go deaf on one of those resurrections?" Dream gives him a lazy kick to the ribs, enough that Wilbur cries out, but he still doesn't get up.

"He might not be able to," Tommy says hoarsely.

“What?”

“H-He might have a... a hard time moving. F-From the...” Tommy trails off.

“Oh, in that case, fine. You move him, then,” Dream shrugs and takes out his crossbow again, shooting Wilbur in the throat. He turns, ignoring Wilbur struggling on the ground, and goes back into the dark corridor.

“Wil!” Tommy, Dream now gone, cannot stop himself from rushing to his brother’s side. He knows he cannot help him now. Wilbur’s hands tremble as he fumbles with the bolt in his throat. “N-No, Wil, it’s– it’s no good, it’s– It’ll be over soon,” Tommy chokes out. Tommy can see it in his brother’s eyes, he’s pleading with him, he’s begging Tommy to make it hurt less, to make it over sooner. Tommy holds his brother’s hand. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry I’m so sorry,” he whispers frantically. He doesn’t think he can do it. It will take another minute or so for Wilbur to finish drowning, and Tommy cannot bring himself to end it sooner.

Wilbur gives his hand a squeeze and it’s almost like a reply, *it’s okay. I know.*

Wilbur stops struggling some time in the time it takes Dream to return from wherever. He doesn’t even acknowledge Tommy holding his dead brother’s hand, just grabs Wilbur’s corpse off the ground. “Yeah. You’re too weak to carry him anyway, so just follow me,” Dream says.

Tommy numbly obliges, wiping Wilbur’s blood on his already stained shirt. His hand doesn’t hurt so much anymore. Tommy glances up and sees where they’re going.

“Why?” Tommy stops, voice feeble and frantic.

“Huh?” Dream glances back over his shoulder. “Oh! It’s time for your test. You seemed ready, right?” He tosses Wilbur’s body into the dark cell, the back corner now occupied by the cauldron of lava. “Here you go,” Dream presses a blank book and a quill into Tommy’s hands. He nods toward the dark cell, as if somehow expecting Tommy to walk inside willingly. Tommy stays frozen, staring at his brother’s body slumped in a heap against the wall. The room is too small. It was too small for him alone, and now it’s grown even more crowded. Dream, unceremoniously, without a word, shoves Tommy forward into the room, Tommy tripping over Wilbur’s legs and barely managing to put a hand out against the wall to stop himself from falling onto his brother’s corpse.

“Once you bring him back, I’ll let you out! And just because I’m feeling nice, here’s an extra book in case you fuck up!” Dream throws another book into the cell.

“No,” Tommy says weakly. He struggles to turn around in the crowded space. “Dream, please, just– please I know what you want from me, b-but anywhere else, I will try it just please *please please*–” Tommy cuts himself off with a choked sob. He doesn’t try to shove past Dream, he can only beg. “N-Not in here, not like this, I’m sorry, I’m so *so so* sorry I shouldn’t have t-tried to get XD, I shouldn’t–”

“Tommy, Tommy,” Dream cuts him off, scolding and calm. If there’s fury, it’s kept behind a far more terrifying mask. “I get it, okay? You wanted help, so you tried to get a God there to

help you. You just got *confused*, right?”

“Right,” Tommy says, staring desperately up at Dream’s silhouette, mask lit faintly by the orange glow of the lava, that smile radiating cruelty.

“And now you know!” Dream says cheerfully. “As far as you’re concerned, Tommy, I *am* God. Next time you won’t forget who you should be praying to.”

“Dream, please—”

The obsidian seals over and Tommy is left trying to pray to a blank wall. Tommy is alone. The room no longer pitch black, and instead Tommy is forced to make out Wilbur’s dead eyes by the light of the lava, the only sound is his frantic breathing and the bubbling from the cauldron. He’s exhausted, chest heaving with sobs. The room is already growing warm, heated easily by the lava. Tommy sits in the corner as far from the body as he can manage, which means nothing as there is no place, not even tucked as far behind the cauldron as he can manage, that he cannot see his brother’s empty, dead face staring at him. He fumbles for the empty book.

He tries to remember.

Chapter End Notes

Hi. I don't know what came over me. Most of this wasn't in the original plans. Idk who knows.

Uh. Sorry?

Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

CW: THIS IS AN IMPORTANT ONE! READ THIS IF YOU HAVE ANY CONCERNS! This chapter is adjacent to the one where Wilbur hurts Tommy, but it doesn't actually go that way! (spoiler) the boys fight. I do not think it is upsetting in the same way nor does it have that framework of abuse. It's still crime boys drama, though, and it does reference a lot of the stuff from that chapter.

Also Wilbur's dead body is around for a while and vividly described. Lots of discussion of suicide, violence, etc.

I don't have a chapter summary written for this one yet, but if someone would like it please comment and let me know and I will add one ASAP!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tommy does not rush while writing this copy of the book. He's as careful as he can be, struggling to see from the dim glow of the lava, *only* looking down at the book in front of him. He tries to ignore the sharp scent of copper in the air, the hint of sulfur and hot metal added by the lava. He feels sick. His hand hurts so badly. He's starting to think he won't be able to write at all. He wishes Dream had killed him, just once, so he could've been brought back with the blisters at least a little healed. The salt of his sweat burns the wounds. Tommy takes a deep breath, the scent of the ink making him gag more than the sulfur.

"You don't have a choice..." Tommy mutters hoarsely. "You don't have a choice you don't have a choice you don't have a choice—" He closes his eyes. He tries not to think. He starts to write, even as it sends sharp threads of agony all the way up his arm. The pain almost helps him focus. Tommy gets through twenty pages before he panics.

"What..." Tommy stares, wide-eyed at the page. He made the mistake of thinking, and now for the life of him he cannot remember where he left off. Two hour cycles of repetition, of symbols constantly changing, sometimes it had felt like there might be a pattern, but none he could hold onto, he was writing them only with repetition to teach him. "Come on, think *think think*—" Tommy hits his forehead, eyes shut tightly as he buries the fear clawing up his throat.

What if he leaves you here so long Wilbur starts to rot?

"Shut up!" Tommy shouts to walls too close for even an echo. He tries to stop his panicked breathing. The sooner he gets this done, the sooner he gets out. Somehow that doesn't make it easier. Tommy bunches up the front of his tattered shirt and bites down on the fabric, the taste of blood meaningless. He screams until his throat is raw. He takes another, slower, deep breath.

He writes again.

He's wired like a spring, jumping at the faint pop of the lava bubbling, and every once and a while, the orange light casting its strange shadows, he finds himself bolting upright to stare at Wilbur's body, the dull light shifting in just the right way that Tommy thinks Wilbur has sat up to look at him. Each time he's met by empty, glassy eyes staring at nothing. He should close his eyes. The thought of getting any closer to the body makes him want to vomit. He pushes himself further into the corner, closer to the burning hot metal of the cauldron, but from here he can only see Wilbur's legs, splayed out and bent in a way that in life Tommy thinks would probably hurt, but his brother doesn't seem to care right now.

Tommy giggles to himself at the silly thought of his brother's corpse *caring*.

"Really losing it now, eh?" Tommy says to Wilbur's corpse like they share an inside joke. The humor fades the moment he leans forward and sees his brother's eyes again. Tommy realizes he had started smiling and immediately stops. He looks away, back at the book in his lap. He writes, and he bleeds, but he keeps writing. He tries to let the memory of his tortured muscles do the work, instead trying not to think about anything, trying to let it all fade out into the simple pattern, the rhythm of writing it. He *tries and tries and tries*, until time blurs and he stops noticing the way the sweat burns any open wounds or the way his eyes hurt or even the agony trailing up his arm.

And then he runs out of pages.

Tommy stares at the completed book from a numb, and hazy sort of daze. *Oh. You did it.*

Tommy stands on trembling legs. He has no way to check his work, save one. Waiting won't help him, but he's terrified it won't work. Tommy stands over the cauldron, the heat almost hurting his skin. *Waiting won't save you.*

Bringing him back won't save you either, but at least you won't have to look at those dead fucking eyes anymore.

Tommy drops the book in.

Tommy whispers, despite there being no one alive to hear, nor any gods to grant his wish. *"Bring him back bring him back bring him back bring him back—"*

Tommy doesn't look at the body, he keeps staring at the lava, waiting, thinking if he waits just a bit longer it'll mean it worked. He keeps waiting. Tommy doesn't break down, he doesn't scream his frustrations or claw at the walls, he just keeps staring at the lava.

"Oh," Tommy says softly. He leans back against the wall, sliding to the ground. He wants to rest. He can't with Wilbur looking at him like that. He sighs, and sits up, leaning forward, reaching out. He hesitates, his hand inches from Wilbur's face. He pushes forward a little more and brushes Wilbur's eyes closed. They resist slightly, and Tommy tries not to think about it, but after they stay mostly closed. It's too dark for Tommy to see if they're still a little open, not that he minds that. Tommy returns to his corner and curls into a ball.

He doesn't sleep.

He knows there's another copy waiting to be written, he has one more book, but the weight of it all feels so crushing. If he messes up this time, that's it. There's nothing more for him to do but wait for Dream to get impatient enough to open that door. Although he doesn't know how Dream expects him to tell him if he's successful or not. Tommy grabs the other blank book and takes a deep breath. He shouldn't think about it too much, when he thinks about it too much he panics and messes up.

Tommy writes, he gets through six pages before he is unsure. "No, no that's not right... is it..?" He mutters, staring at the page in the dull light. "That... that looks like a bit that comes later, or..." Tommy pauses. "Okay, okay you can- try again."

Tommy flips back to the first page and begins to trace over the letters, rewriting it from the start until he finds his place again and continues with more certainty.

It works. It is horribly tedious, but it works.

Each time Tommy panics and forgets, he goes back to the beginning, and later when he's lucky a part he refers to as a checkpoint to start over at, and then he keeps going. He's exhausted, he wants to stop, to *rest*, to let his hand bleed in peace instead of pushing himself further, but he's scared if he stops now he'll lose his place entirely and he doesn't know how much longer he can spend in here.

He still thinks he sees Wilbur move out of the corner of his eye. He can't stop himself from glancing up to make sure, but seeing his brother's head lolling limply against his bloody chest, the blood dried dark now and the split skin from the wound barely visible as shadow. If he were braver, or more desperate, he'd take off Wilbur's coat and cover him more properly with it, but he can't bring himself to do that. He also thinks Wilbur's corpse would creep him out just as much like that. It's hard enough being able to see him and think he's moving sometimes, it would probably be worse if it was a faceless shape under a coat.

"At least you haven't gone so fuckin' nuts he's started *talking* to you, eh?" Tommy says wearily, writing on, sparing one last glance back over at the body, as if daring it to reply. Wilbur remains unmoving and eerie. "Why you lettin' your jaw hang open like that, Wil? Shut your trap, you're gonna catch flies," Tommy laughs hoarsely. He realizes he's smiling, it unnerves him. He stops. He shakes his head, unnerved by himself. "Having banter with a fuckin' corpse, come *on* Tommyinnit that is a new low, even for you..."

He's lost his place.

"Fucking fuck, shit, fuck," Tommy scowls, flipping back a few pages until he sees something that makes sense. His hand continues to reward him with sharp pain as he traces over the letters he's already written, just not pressing hard enough to write over it and risk messing up what he's done.

Tommy keeps going. He pauses once more when his eyes water enough that he cries, pain or frustration, the reason doesn't matter. He has to pause to make sure tears don't smear the ink and to make sure he can see the page. The one good thing about this hellhole is he has all the

time in the world. He forces himself not to look at Wilbur again, even as the thought somehow tempts him. He wishes he had less time. He wishes there were a way out for him beyond whatever he hoped to gain from this stupid fucking book.

Tommy isn't really feeling much right now, weary, frustrated, exhausted, all of it feels muted, behind a screen of *I have to do this I have to do this I have to do this*—

It makes things easier just as it makes Tommy fleetingly wonder if he's going to get stuck like this, empty and buried, no longer a person just a machine that can follow a few bitter, bloody instructions.

Tommy gets more panicked when he gets closer to the end, but he knows what to do now, he goes back until it makes sense, he traces over it. It hasn't failed him yet. Although for all he knows a mistake has just slipped past him and he's doomed himself already. Tommy is surprised he hasn't snapped so much he's started rewriting the same page over and over— he's checked to make sure— but somehow he's kept his sanity intact enough that he swears the book is correct. The last three pages he gets panicked. There's too much left to write. Tommy forces his handwriting into something cramped and shaky but not exactly wrong. He must spend a half hour just on the last page. He's turned around, ignoring that his legs press against Wilbur's, but it's the only way he could set the book on the ground, kneeling so he can crouch over it, left hand holding his right as he painstakingly draws out each rune.

Tommy finishes with half a page blank to spare. He's breathing heavily, he presses his forehead to the obsidian floor, eyes closed, his right hand feels almost tingly now, his arms sore as they lay limply at his side. He's done. It's out of his hands now. Either it works, or it doesn't.

If it doesn't?

"It has to... it has to," Tommy says weakly. He hadn't noticed how thirsty he's gotten, the lava drying out the air. His eyes ache. The only thing that gets him moving again is the weary, bitter thought that right now it's almost like he's praying, head bowed, pleading to forces out of his control. He refuses.

Tommy sits up slowly, closing the book with the utmost care. He tries to stand and almost topples over against the hot metal of the cauldron. He steadies himself, his hand catching himself against the wall, his palm stinging from the impact. His head pounds, his legs shake, suffice to say he's not doing well. Tommy squints at the lava.

Tommy has a wild thought that just in case he should go over the entire thing again, just write over it just to be safe. Maybe that's the smart thing to do, but it's not the easy one. It's too hard. It's hours more, it's going through the same hell all over again and to what end? To pen in some mistake a second time, or to spend hours correcting absolutely nothing? Tommy's arm trembles as he holds the book over the lava.

"Please please please work..." Tommy whispers. He drops the book. *Bring him back bring him back bring him back*—

Tommy turns from the lava, its glow burned into his eyes, staring at Wilbur instead. His vision takes a while to recover from the bright light to the gloom, and in that blur, that static over his sight, he can pretend that Wilbur will be alive and staring back at him once it clears.

“Wil?” Tommy says hoarsely. His brother’s outline becomes clearer, and so does his empty, dead face, his slack jaw, his half closed eyes, his bloodied neck, and his unmoving chest. “No, no no *no no no— No!*” Tommy falls back against the wall, tugging at fistfuls of his hair even as it irritates the wounds on his right hand even further. He sits. “It didn’t... it didn’t work. It didn’t work.” Tommy’s panic dies perhaps too easily. It’s all out of his control now. He can rest. If Dream intends to keep him in here for days more, he’ll off himself with the lava.

At least now Tommy doesn’t have to worry about Wilbur hearing him cry.

“Y’know I really thought you were gonna...” Tommy trails off. “Fuck am I doing... I really thought you’d somehow make all this easier for me, do you know that?” An accusation to which there is no answer. “Even before you... before what you did, I held onto you ‘cause you were *it*, y’know? But you couldn’t actually help me. Not that I expected you to, but...”

Tommy is less fazed now. He knows Wilbur’s corpse isn’t moving out of the corner of his eye. It isn’t moving any time soon. Wilbur does not look like he’s sleeping. The dead rarely do.

“I guess I didn’t realize how much bad you could bring too. Not just Dream threatening you, *that* I expected. That I could... fit the puzzle piece to, I guess,” Tommy swallows thickly. There’s no reason to hold back his anger, his grief, the tremor in his voice, but he can’t help but try. “Not this, though. I just don’t understand,” Tommy scrunches his nose up, disgust and horror and even shame rising unbidden. “You told me to shut up. You told me to *shut up* after *he* said that shit about L’Manberg— oh *fuck*,” Tommy lays back against the wall, hands over his face. “L’Manberg...” The tremor in his voice grows worse. “A-And I don’t even know what happened to them, if they’re okay, who got hurt, a-and it’s *destroyed*. It got destroyed!” He gestures emphatically, elbow hitting the wall behind him enough to bruise, but he barely notices. “All over again it’s gone, and... you know that means I gotta think of you. Think of what you fucking did to us...” Tommy sighs. “Maybe I thought we got over this shit in Limbo, but... well, then you hurting me again changes things, eh?”

Silence. There is no reply and still this is somehow easier. Tommy can talk to a corpse. A corpse doesn’t offer remorse or shame or anything like love.

A different thought rises up, one Tommy has done his best to ward off, but if there’s ever a time to confess, surely it’s now. “I don’t know what I did. What’d I do wrong that made you do that to me?” Tommy says softly. At this point he isn’t sure if he’s talking about L’Manberg or Wilbur hitting him. There is, of course, no reply. Tommy knows he shouldn’t feel guilty for what Wilbur had done. The feeling quietly remains anyway. Tommy sighs, leaning back. “I actually sort of want an answer to that one, doesn’t mean fuck all if I’m asking you now...” Tommy is so tired. He’s hungry too. He doesn’t know at what point it will get bad enough he’ll kill himself in the lava. That’s another thing, the damp cold has been replaced by a dry heat permeating the air with the faint scent of sulfur. It’s not exactly cozy. He won’t dunk his head in the lava just yet, but he’s still trying to ignore that irritating

worry about how long it takes for a corpse to become *more* corpse-like. He doesn't want to have to bear witness to that, but those are his choices. Killing himself or watching that change.

It's not the pain that's causing him to wait, it's the company. Tommy had desperately wanted Wilbur revived, Wilbur revived meant Dream would let him out, but right now he'd rather think he didn't want Wilbur around him either, even if he knows that's not fully true. If Tommy kills himself, that's months of Wilbur apologizing and groveling, months of them being the only company they have unless they managed to track down MD or Schlatt. He doesn't think he can bear it. His brother's endless remorse unfiltered by a stone wall. Right now, Tommy will tolerate the corpse instead.

~

Punz returns to the base to quiet. It makes him uneasy. What makes him even *more* uneasy is the sight of Tommy and Wilbur's cell doors open and empty.

"Dream?" Punz shouts down the hall. "Dream?!—" Punz jumps when out of the library that white mask appears. "Where the fuck are they?"

"Down there," Dream nods to the distant end of the corridor and the obsidian cell.

"What, *both* of them?"

"I mean, technically only one now," Dream halfheartedly buries his amusement.

Punz can connect the dots. He asks anyway. "What'd you mean?"

"Tommy is going to revive Wilbur. Or he won't, and he'll spend a very shitty few days locked up with his brother's corpse," Dream shrugs. "Up to him."

"Did you..." Punz frowns, trying to comprehend this newest bit of lunacy. "Did you give him a revive book?"

"What?" Dream laughs. "*No*. The point is he's got to *memorize* it. I gave him a blank book. *And* I was nice and gave him a backup!"

"But wait— You *just* gave it to him a few days ago, how the fuck do you expect him to have memorized the whole thing?" Punz knows he won't get an answer he'll like, but he can't help but ask anyway.

Dream shrugs. "I dunno, you'd be surprised how well Tommy can function under pressure."

"And if he doesn't bring him back, that's it, you're gonna leave him in that fucking closet with a rotting corpse?" Punz cannot stop the tremor in his voice.

Dream exhales a laugh. "Punz, your moral boundaries are fascinating. I mean, how do you keep it all straight? So, if I'm following right, hunting him for sport? You'll do that, that's fine, right? You'll participate, even. Beating him senseless for something you probably would've done in his shoes? Why not, the little shit deserves it, right? Hm, what else—"

another laugh, “what about holding him down while I put hot iron around his wrist? Also fine. But leaving him locked in a little room with a dead body? Oh no, that’s too *much* for poor Tommy, right?” Dream waits for his reply. There isn’t one. “Sure. Of course. It’s adorable how you make excuses, Punz. Both for your empathy and your complacency.”

Punz cannot defend himself, he deflects. “I’m just saying, he’s not going to get any better memorizing the book locked up in there, right? It’s a waste of time.”

“True,” Dream shrugs. “And, well, the stakes are higher than he knows. If he revives Wilbur, well, that’s some of my plans ruined.”

“What do you mean? What *plans*?”

“You know, *plans*. ”

Punz sighs, eyes closed as a migraine forms. “And... how are you going to know, then? When he’s brought Wilbur back?”

Dream shrugs. “Wait for him to scream to be let out.”

“And what makes you so sure he won’t do it before? Or if he fails?”

“I mean, I’d imagine I’d hear *Wilbur’s* voice too, so,” Dream seems utterly disinterested with the logistics.

Punz, fed up, heads down the corridor.

“Wait, where the hell do you think you’re going?” Dream follows him.

Punz doesn’t answer.

“*Hey!* I told you what I was doing, don’t *undermine* me—”

“I’m just seeing if he’s revived him yet,” is Punz’s excuse. He stops outside the wall, listening. “He’s talking.”

“He is?” Dream’s irritation is replaced by intrigue, as he presses his ear to the stone as well. “Holy shit, I didn’t think he actually could,” Dream almost sounds impressed. He places a lever.

“Really? That’s all it took?” Punz steps back, giving Dream a scathing look.

Dream shrugs and opens the cell.

Tommy squints, covering his eyes. He remains back in his corner, and in the opposite corner, Wilbur’s corpse.

“Oh, thank fuck,” Tommy scrambles to his feet.

Dream sighs. “You were what, talking to yourself?”

Tommy looks startled, almost offended. “N-No, I was– I was talking to Wilbur,” he gestures to the corpse.

“Of course you were,” Dream reaches for the lever.

“*No! Wait, please!*” Tommy screams immediately, about to barrel into the narrow corridor, clinging to the wall. “B-Books are done! Burned them, I couldn’t do it, there is *no point* in leaving me in here, *please–*”

Dream still goes for the lever.

“*I’ll kill myself! I swear to fucking god I will burn myself alive!*” Tommy’s voice is broken and hoarse as he screams loud enough Punz winces.

Dream pauses. “Okay, and?”

“And you didn’t want me talking to Wilbur, did you, and then I’ll be able to talk to him for ages, right? That’s not what you want,” Tommy says breathlessly, eyes watering and wide, almost manic as he revels in the victory of at least making Dream hesitate.

“So, you’re threatening me, now? To get your way, that’s what you think will work?” Dream says dryly.

“N-No, it’s not– I’m not threatening you, Dream, it’s just what will happen, *please,*” Tommy’s nails dig into the obsidian enough that Punz knows it must hurt.

“Okay, so I get rid of the lava. What’ll you do then?” Dream is *taunting* him now.

“I d-don’t understand, why would you want to risk it? Risk me finding another way? I don’t fucking understand, I need more time to memorize it, *please* I can’t do that in here,” Tommy manages to stay coherent even as it’s clear he’s slipping. Punz is surprised he hasn’t thrown himself at Dream yet or taken an early dive into the lava.

Dream mulls it over. “I mean, I could always give you more books. Blank ones and the copy I gave you. You could practice in there with Wilbur for company. You can’t burn the books without the lava, so. You’d be there with very much *dead* company, of course.”

“How would I see?” Tommy says boldly, like he’s dug out some epiphany that will stump Dream. “C-Can’t see normally it’s pitch-fucking-black in there, so I can’t memorize it then without the lava light.”

Dream shrugs. “Give you a sea lantern. Come on, Tommy, you’re not gonna *win* this.”

Punz is almost fascinated. It’s not just Tommy’s desperate pleading or Dream’s taunting, the two of them are playing the same childish game, but for one the stakes are as drastic as his sanity and the other cares only for the fun of it, and nonetheless, it is the same game they’re both playing.

“What if I refuse? What if I don’t learn the book while I’m in here, that’ll slow you down, won’t it? At this point I don’t think I *can* keep writing, my hand is *so* fucked, s-so why

bother? There is nothing for *either* of us—" Tommy glances at Punz, like he's an afterthought, "*any* of us to gain from this."

"Hm," Dream considers it. "I mean, staying in this room is a punishment. And if you're really going to give me this kind of attitude, it means you haven't learned your lesson and *should* stay in here."

"Why?" Tommy snarls, "because Wilbur isn't fucking here to smack me around instead?"

Dream pauses, his posture changes minutely, it's harder to read than if Punz could see his face, but it's *something*. "Why do you say that?" He's less taunting now, there's something colder in his tone, cautious even.

Tommy doesn't bother answering his question, barreling on to the next argument he's had waiting. "I *will* find a way to fucking kill myself in here, do you hear me? I will use the— the quills leftover from the books to slit my fucking wrists and if you think *oh now I can just take the quills away and that'll fix the problem oh I'm Dream I am so smart!* Well in that case I will just fucking dig into my fucked up hand, it's already cut up, it's already got blisters, do you think I couldn't do it? Do you think I couldn't make it bad enough I'll bleed out? W— What else have you *got*, Dream?" Tommy takes another step forward, now fully in the doorway of the cell, holding onto the frame for dear life. "You'll, what, chain me up so I can't slit my wrists, maybe I'll try bashing my fucking head in. Maybe I'll c-crush Wilbur's skinny little chest in until I can fucking impale myself on his fucking *ribs*," Tommy hisses through bared teeth, all of his fear, his survival, it's like it's been swallowed up by fury alone. Tommy is still breathing heavily, and for a moment Punz thinks he's finished, but he hasn't. "Did you ever plan for this part, Dream? Did you ever think there'd come a point where whatever you had planned wouldn't be enough for me anymore?"

"Meaning?" Dream doesn't sound unsettled, he still sounds almost intrigued and Punz doesn't know how he can look Tommy in the eye right now and not flinch.

"Putting me in here with Wilbur, that's already fucking *low*," Tommy's lip curls in disgust, radiating malice rather than fear. "But there's no reason for me to keep trying, Dream. Burnt up the books, couldn't keep fighting it anymore, so I just sat back and had a good old chat with brother dearest. The novelty wore off," Tommy tuts him. "So what else have you got?" What had once been desperate pleas and then manic rage now has settled in on something almost like a challenge.

"Hm. Do you think the *novelty* might start to come back when... *brother dearest* starts to stink like roadkill?" Dream replies, he does not yield, he keeps playing the game. "Your enthusiasm is inspiring, Tommy, really, but do you think it's gonna *last*? You know how bad it gets in there without a carcass for company. You can't have really forgotten, have you? You still gonna feel this way *then*?"

Tommy laughs, almost a whimper, but he doesn't hesitate. "Okay," he shrugs. "Fine. You leave me in here for weeks, I am dead in, what, five days? It's not pleasant, trust me, I know, but it's not exactly the hell you're drawing up for me. We're in a fucking bunker, it's sealed up, innit? How much d'you think he'll actually rot in the time it takes for me to die of thirst?

You should know better. And again, that's assuming you decide to put in the effort of every fucking preventative measure it would take to stop me killing myself."

Punz feels almost impressed. *You should know better.* What the fuck happened to Tommy in there to make him *that* bold?

Dream doesn't respond immediately. So Tommy continues. "So, again, Dream. *What else have you got?* Whatever you've got in mind, no matter how bad, I have been fucking blessed with a lack of choice, whatever it is, all I can do is endure it and move the fuck on with my day. You'll run out of creativity eventually, and thanks to your fucking obsession, I will never run out of lives. Let's do some deep thinking, shall we? Be all scholarly and shit. How long until you literally cannot control me? Until at the very least I'll stop participating and it'll get *boring* for you. I'll be generous, pretend you've got some more torment up your sleeve that I won't simply *get over*, or let go into, so that's... maybe a century more of you fucking with me? Do you think after a *century* you'll be able to keep up the fuckin' hype?"

"That's what you're hinging your bets on? A century? Sure, I'll play along. Let's say in *one hundred years* you get *so* boring I give up. Let's say I don't give up and leave you dead or locked in a hole somewhere, let's say in a century you're *free*," Dream says scornfully. "There will be *nothing* left for you in the outside world. They'll all be dead and gone."

Tommy grins. "Dead, probably, *gone*? Nah," Tommy laughs. "You made sure of that, didn't you?" He raises his eyebrows, unimpressed. "My penmanship could use a little work, clearly, but... I'd say I'm almost there. Unless you're planning on no longer letting me memorize it, which," Tommy nods, pretending to consider it thoughtfully, "I don't think you will! Will you? Because there's some big fancy Dream-y *reason* why you're having me learn it in the first place! Eh?"

"Huh," Dream stays calm, almost amused. "You've snapped."

"Oh, *have I?*" Tommy chuckles, almost like the rowdy temperament Punz remembers from back in the day. "Possibly. Probably. So fucking *what?*"

The final straw. Tommy *spits in Dream's face*.

Not *just* in his face, or rather his mask, no, the kid has good aim, he was aiming right for Dream's eye. Dream grabs Tommy by the collar of his shirt, slamming him into the wall, and Tommy is a mess of wheezing, hysterical, barking laughter.

"Punz, grab Wilbur."

"What? Why?"

"Because. Tommy thinks he's won. Only fair he gets his prize."

Tommy doesn't look afraid even then, staring at Dream, still daring him to do something that will actually faze him.

Tommy is still almost beaming as Dream drags him down the corridor, scraping his arm against the stone brick, until they reach the dome. Dream throws him to the ground. Tommy doesn't bother trying to get up.

"Oooh Dream you're so *scary*, such a big bad guy!" Tommy laughs breathlessly. "You— You know what? You are creating your worst nightmare!" Tommy cackles. "A Tommyinnit with the pain tolerance of a fuckin'— I dunno something with a high pain tolerance! I'd tell you to do your worst, but you've been doing that, haven't you?"

"Punz!" Dream calls irritably.

"What do you want from me? He's a grown man, he's heavy," Punz huffs, tossing Wilbur's corpse into the water.

Dream gets out a revive book.

"Ohhh, that's *cheating*, Dream! I was supposed to bring him back, remember?" Tommy says mockingly.

"Tommy, just shut up!" Dream snaps.

Tommy's grin falls, he looks over at Wilbur's body in the ground beside him. "Wilbur said that when he— you—you can't be saying that shit," Tommy frowns.

"He's insane," Punz says flatly.

"You're one to talk!" Tommy points an accusing finger in his direction still on the ground.

"Tommy, shut up or I will cut out your fucking tongue! Wilbur didn't say that, now, did he?" Dream snaps.

Tommy scoffs. "I can still be annoying without a tongue. Just also be in-co-herent," he pronounces every syllable.

Dream ignores him, opening the book, and finally Wilbur breathes again.

"Hey, Wil," Tommy says halfheartedly. "How'd Limbo treat you?"

Wilbur gasps for breath, curling into a ball as his newly repaired and reignited body remembers how to inhale. Wilbur stares at Tommy, weary and still struggling to inhale properly, old blood caught in his throat.

"Not much to say, eh?" Tommy says. "Not too different than the cold shoulder treatment you've been giving me for hours," Tommy makes himself laugh again.

Wilbur's weariness fades into concern. It's been a hard few days for him, weeks even, and here's Tommy looking far too calm, despite their still being in a shitty predicament.

"Tommy..." Wilbur rasps. He doesn't know what to say. *Are you okay?* feels a bit redundant.

“Wilbur, are you back with us?” Dream cuts in. “Your brother failed you. He was supposed to bring you back and he didn’t.”

Wilbur glances at Dream, uninterested. “Okay..?”

“He’s also decided to take it upon himself to be a mouthy brat again.”

Tommy giggles, “I spat in his face,” he whispers loudly to Wilbur.

“Tommy—!” Dream’s frustration reveals itself once more, he steps back, calm clearly taking effort. “Wilbur,” he says, voice steadier. “I wanted to give you some input, considering Tommy’s recent behavior can’t continue, right?”

Wilbur resists the urge to say *you’re a bit obvious, you know that?* Instead he struggles to sit up. Great. Dream brought him back with the sole intention of strong arming him into hurting his brother again. Wilbur moves, and Tommy moves in turn, watching his brother carefully. Wilbur stands, slowly, painstakingly, and Tommy stands.

“You fucking wouldn’t,” Tommy snarls, deranged mirth exchanged for rage immediately.

Wilbur winces. He wants to apologize. He has a feeling Dream wouldn’t approve. He takes one step forward, he raises his hand, he stops. Tommy doesn’t flinch, he just stares at him, daring him to. Wilbur looks at Dream, who gives the slightest of nods.

All those days spent alone, and he hadn’t been able to figure out a way to not do this, he doesn’t want to hurt Tommy, and no amount of hours spent obsessing over the idea would give him a way out. He cannot stop himself, Dream’s disapproval or not, from shakily whispering a feeble *“I’m sorry,”* as he moves forward.

And then Wilbur is flat on his back, the wind knocked out of him. Tommy is standing over him. He’d knocked his legs out from under him and Wilbur has never felt more relieved, even as his brother stares down at him, disgusted and disappointed.

“You we’re gonna do it again?! *Really?* You seriously were? You’re a fucking piece of *shit*, Wilbur,” Tommy snaps. “Fuck you,” he turns away from Wilbur, taking a few steps to put some distance between them. He cannot storm off properly, so this will have to do.

Wilbur remains on the ground. He wants to give up. He looks at Dream. Dream shakes his head.

He can’t. Those hours in Limbo, he could think of no way around it, but he had also had plenty of time to picture the ways in which it could go wrong, the harm Dream could inflict in his place.

Come on, it’s just like... like ripping off a bandaid. Get it over with.

Wilbur stands again.

“Look, Tommy, you know you can’t—” Wilbur sighs. He doesn’t want to have to manufacture a lecture alongside his violence. Wilbur forces himself to walk forward before he can

continue to think about it. He reaches out for Tommy's shoulder to turn him around and instead he finds himself on the ground again, his hand had barely brushed against him and Tommy had turned on a dime, his bony fist nailing Wilbur in the jaw.

"I can't *what*, Wilbur? Fucking *what*?" Tommy is almost screaming at him now. "No, go on, what the fuck were you gonna say? You were gonna scold *me*? For fucking *what*?!"

Wilbur's jaw aches, he glances over at that stupid white mask that apparently dictates his every move. Dream gives no indication of allowing him to stop.

"Wilbur, are you even trying?" Dream scoffs. "I thought you wanted to handle this."

Wilbur is burning to make a furious retort in his direction, but he knows that's a fantastic way to get Dream to take matters into his own hands, still, he cannot resist some argument as for the third time he tries to get off the ground.

"What do you suggest then, Dream?! What would *you* do?" Wilbur snaps.

Tommy remains on the defensive, looking from Wilbur, to Dream, to Punz. He feels cornered by all three of them.

Dream laughs. "Yeah, you don't want to know what I'd do, Wilbur," he says, voice low and dangerous.

Wilbur doesn't know what he expected. He takes a mere step toward Tommy, and Tommy is running at him screaming, sounding almost more animal than human. Wilbur feels the wind knocked out of him as Tommy tackles him to the ground. Tommy remains on top of him, pinning his arms in the water.

"Move! Do it, I dare you, fucking *move*!" Tommy shouts in his face.

They're about as equally matched as they've always been. Tommy has always been the better fighter, and they've both grown weak in the same ways. Wilbur tries to squirm free, but Tommy holds strong.

Dream is doing his best to hide his giddiness, to keep his voice firm and scolding. "Wilbur, are you really that weak? Do you need *my* help?"

Tommy leans closer, hissing, "yeah, *do you*?"

"I don't—" Wilbur is finding it harder to breathe with Tommy crushing his chest, even harder to omit the truth. "I really d-don't want his help."

"You heard the man, then," Tommy sneers. "Try harder."

Wilbur struggles furiously. His left arm tears free, Tommy's grip there incredibly weak from the damage done by writing to his right, but before he can reach for Tommy, to push him off, to hit him, whatever, Tommy deflects him easily, on impulse, letting Wilbur's other arm go free so he can attempt to shove him off there as well. Tommy tries to swat him away before, impulsively, he grabs Wilbur's glasses, holding them above his head.

“I-I’ll break them! You won’t be able to see, old man, you want me to do that?!” Tommy says, his other arm trying to swat Wilbur’s hands away.

Wilbur laughs weakly. “It doesn’t matter, Tommy.”

“Yeah it fucking matters!” Tommy snaps, “d’you see a fucking ophthalmologist out here?!”

Wilbur frowns. He’s stopped struggling. “D’you mean an optometrist?”

“No, I mean ophthalmologist,” Tommy glowers.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah I’m fucking sure!”

“You’re both right. Kind of I think Wilbur is more right, though,” Punz offers helpfully.

“Why the fuck are you here?” Tommy looks at Punz, almost offended.

“Wilbur! What the fuck is wrong with you?!” Dream bursts out, growing more impatient. “You have the strength to try and rip my throat out, but you can’t even punch your stupid brother?! He’s like a 130 pounds!”

“What the fuck are *you* on about, Dream?! Are you planning on hurting Wilbur to fuck with me or not?” Tommy looks away from Wilbur to glare at Dream.

Wilbur takes the opportunity to try to shove Tommy off of him. He wants Tommy to win, but if Dream doesn’t think he’s trying, he doesn’t think Dream will let this go. Tommy yelps, hitting the ground, immediately scrambling back as Wilbur struggles to stand.

“Get back! Stay the *fuck* away from me!” Tommy raises one hand like somehow that will stop him as he continues to try to move backwards, trying to get to his feet, because being on the ground is dangerous, being on the ground means a kick to the ribs.

Wilbur stops. He doesn’t want to step forward. His brother is running from *him*.

Tommy gets his footing and some of the terror fades. “Don’t fucking test me, Wil. You know I can kick your ass.”

“Okay, do it, then,” Wilbur means it. He tries to repress the tremor in his voice, “I... I *can’t* stop myself, so you need to stop me. So you’ve gotta make sure I can’t get back up.”

Tommy stares at him, baffled and uncomprehending. “What’s he gonna do to you?” Tommy doesn’t look at Dream, he wants *Wilbur* to answer. Wilbur has always been self destructive, but he’s asking Tommy to hurt him. Tommy can’t help but think of Phil and what he had done, he wonders if Wilbur had pleaded for Phil to kill him in the same way. He doesn’t understand what Wilbur had been running from, what pain he had been avoiding when he’d tried to destroy himself with L’Manberg all that time ago, and he doesn’t know what kind of pain Wilbur is avoiding now. Wilbur had hurt him, and now he’s expecting Tommy to be the one to stop him, like he’s a rabid dog who needs put down.

“I don’t know,” Wilbur says half a lie, emphatic and almost hopeful. “But I’m scared. Do you understand?”

“This is fucking pathetic,” Dream scoffs. “Is this it, Wilbur? Do you give up?”

“No! No, please, I don’t, I—” Wilbur looks panicked, turning from Dream to Tommy. “Fuck, alright, Tommy, either you stop me, or—”

Tommy doesn’t care about the alternative. He is being given the opportunity to protect himself. He won’t hold back on account of his brother’s miserable state. So he cuts Wilbur off, ramming his shoulder against Wilbur’s chest, knocking the wind out of him and throwing him to the ground.

“Fight back, Wilbur,” Dream says coldly.

It’s too easy. Wilbur is weak, he’s reluctant, Tommy is furious and accustomed to struggling against people much stronger than him.

“Please, Tommy, you don’t understand, if I don’t do this—” Wilbur wheezes, struggling to sit up.

“You want me to just *let* you hurt me? You’re fucking insane,” Tommy snarls. He doesn’t kick Wilbur while he’s down, even as he knows that is the logical next step, instead he waits, if Wilbur tries to stand he’ll knock his feet out from under him.

“Y-You don’t *understand*, Tommy,” Wilbur says shakily. He barely starts to get up when Tommy kicks his arm from supporting him so he falls back to the ground. “Tommy, I am going to keep trying until you make it so I can’t,” Wilbur sounds like he’s pleading, weepy and fragile; Tommy can’t stand it. Something breaks.

“*I hate you! I fucking hate you!*” Tommy grabs Wilbur by his collar, both of them soaked in the cold water by now from their scuffle, Tommy’s fingers feel numb even as he holds on, and Wilbur is still trying. He’s reaching up trying to push Tommy off, trying to scratch at his face, *still* trying to do harm. Tommy pulls Wilbur off from the ground before slamming him back into the stone. Wilbur gasps, the wind knocked out of him, and he has the audacity to reach again, to swing at Tommy’s face, weakly, pathetically, but still persistent, still selfish.

So Tommy pulls Wilbur back up and throws him against the stone, he does it again. He does it until he sees blood in the water.

Wilbur has stopped struggling, and for a brief, terrible, desperate moment Tommy thinks he’s killed him. Wilbur is still alive, still conscious even. He’s dazed. He’s finally stopped trying to hit Tommy.

“T-Thanks, Tommy,” Wilbur rasps, words half slurred. He’s conscious but there’s definitely still brain damage done.

“*T-Thanks?*” Tommy chokes out, he still holds onto fistfuls of Wilbur shirt, sobs breaking free around trembling words. “You’re— Why are you *thanking* me? Why are you thanking

me?” He asks softly, pleading for an answer that will somehow make all of this make sense.

“He shouldn’t be,” Dream says flatly. “You barely even tried, Wilbur.”

Wilbur’s eyes struggle to focus on the white mask approaching them, already there’s water half in his ears, Dream’s words are blurry. Tommy hears Dream’s voice and flinches back, but he doesn’t leave Wilbur’s side, despite it all, he stays, placing himself between Dream and Wilbur.

“I did... I s-swear I did,” Wilbur pleads weakly. “Please, I *swear* I did—“

“No, no you fucking gave him instructions on what you thought was a way out, huh?” Dream says scathingly. “Why the fuck did you think that would work?”

“D-Don’t—“ Tommy starts to stand up when Dream gets closer to Wilbur, but he falls back into the shallow water as Dream backhands him across the face. Tommy gets back up immediately, before Dream can get any closer to Wilbur. “Dream, *please*, I was the one that fucked up it’s not fair, this is on *me*, not him, *please*—“

“Shut the fuck up, Tommy. Don’t act like you understand *shit*,” Dream laughs, cold, scolding, but not angry, mostly unimpressed. “Wilbur and I had an agreement. I said he could take the lead on punishing you, and if he couldn’t do the job, I get to. So, thank you, Wilbur. I appreciate you handing me the reins.”

Wilbur’s eyes are glassy, tears or maybe from the head trauma. “I tried. I’m so sorry, Tommy, I tried.” Wilbur has stopped trying. He doesn’t think he’s physically capable of trying to protect Tommy. He’s tired.

“I don’t...” Tommy feels numb, a cold dread consuming him. “Don’t understand.”

“*You* don’t have to understand anything, Tommy. Wilbur and I have it all worked out,” Dream says cheerfully.

Wilbur wishes he could move. He wants to keep trying.

“S-Stay the fuck away from me,” Tommy stumbles back, now that he knows Wilbur isn’t a target, he was never a target, of course not. Maybe he should’ve known better. It always comes back to him.

Dream tuts him. “*Tommy*, really? Come on, now, where are you gonna *go*?”

“What— What the fuck were you talking about? Y-You and Wilbur had—“ Tommy is thinking fast and struggling. “An agreement. W-What agreement?”

“Wilbur got dibs on punishing you, and I got you next if he couldn’t measure up. See, he pussied out. Took the easy road. This way he doesn’t have to give you up *or* hit you. And I mean, you lose either way, don’t you, Tommy? You still get hurt, and Wilbur gets to sit back without feeling responsible.”

“It’s not like that,” Wilbur tries to protest. He’s not even sure if Tommy can hear him. He can barely hear himself.

“Stay away,” Tommy croaks out, but Dream doesn’t stop. Whatever this is, whatever Dream has planned, it had been bad enough to make Wilbur act like that. “Stay away– *stay away stay away GET THE FUCK OFF*–“ Tommy screams as loud as he can, writhing and kicking as Dream grabs his arms, pinning them to his side. Dream begins to drag him toward the corridor.

“*STOP! I’LL BE GOOD I’LL BE GOOD I’LL BE GOOD*–“ Tommy struggles fiercely, he screams loud enough it hurts, but Dream is stronger than Wilbur. He’s not letting go, and he’s not taking Tommy to the dark cell either. “*I’LL BE GOOD I’LL BE GOOD I’LL BE GOOD*–“ He already sounds like he’s in pain, clawing at the walls, trying to slow their path, but it’s hopeless and Dream is not relenting. Tommy’s desperation disintegrates further. “*WIL!*” Tommy might as well try prayer. “*PLEASE HELP ME, WIL! PLEASE!*”

Wilbur can hear him. He tries to sit up, he collapses back and briefly goes blind as he hits the stone again. He refocuses on Punz, standing back, passive, a coward. Punz sees him staring.

“What, d’you want me to rescue him, huh? He’s crying for *you*,” Punz is defensive from just a look, tense and wired like a spring, hunched inward from Tommy’s screams.

Wilbur doesn’t reply. He wasn’t going to ask anything of Punz. He doesn’t expect anything of him. He’s just looking at him, waiting to die or fall unconscious. He wishes he had enough strength to shout back, to at least lie to Tommy and tell him he isn’t alone.

Chapter End Notes

ah a cliffhanger, what can I say? There's something wrong with me!

Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

CW: violence, threats of violence, descriptions of injuries, claustrophobia, temporary paralysis, uh. SPOILERS, but. whatever warnings are associated with being buried alive.

This chapter ended up being twice as long as my usual chapters, which is funny considering the whole chapter takes place over the course of maybe like, a half hour? So. Yeah. Good luck with this one.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tommy keeps struggling uselessly as Dream turns off the corridor and into the room Tommy had first woken in what feels like years ago now. That stupid dining table, that infuriating parallel to his pathetic attempts at a beach party back in exile. Dream tires of Tommy clawing at him and trying to pry free, instead throwing him onto the cold stone floors.

Tommy scrambles to his feet, breathing heavily. “Don’t– Don’t come near me, alright?!”

“Or you’ll *what*, Tommy?” Dream scoffs. “You’ll *fight* me? Go on, then! Do it! I’m not Wilbur, what is it you think you can actually do here?”

Tommy pauses. He has no defense. “W-What’re you... why am I here? What’re you gonna do to me?”

“I dunno, Tommy,” Dream sounds irritatingly smug. “I mean, you were the one who said whatever I have planned won’t be enough anymore, right? And what else was it– Oh yeah, you *loved* to remind me that you’re free of choice. You think that fact makes this easier to deal with, is that right?”

Tommy stares at him. He’s no longer arguing back. Dream has already decided he’s going to hurt him and Tommy doesn’t think there’s any way he can talk Dream out of it now. Tommy glances frantically from Dream to the doorway.

“*Wilbur!*” Tommy bolts for the corridor. Dream grabs his arm before he can pass. Tommy desperately tries to yank himself free. He knows obedience cannot save him, there is no way to talk his way free, and really, he knows running nor fighting can offer him any salvation, but what else can he do? “*WIL, PLEASE!*”

~

Wilbur remains on the ground, consciousness swimming and vague. He can barely move, he can hear Tommy screaming for him to help him.

“P-Punz...” Wilbur tries to find the man again, but his vision is blurring. “I don’t want you to save him. I mean, I do, but I know you won’t, I want– I–” Wilbur pauses for a moment, the mere motion of speaking enough to make him feel close to puking.

“What?” Punz glances from the corridor where Tommy’s pleading echoes to the weak figure on the floor. He has no idea what Wilbur could possibly want from him.

Distant, agonizing, Tommy still tries, screaming like he’s already in pain, and Punz has no idea, maybe he is, “*WIL, PLEASE!*”

“Punz, please, I– Do you have...” Wilbur tries to breathe. His head hurts, his whole body hurts. “D-Do you have a revive book?”

“What? No, no of course I fucking don’t.”

“What about... What about the one Tommy was using?”

“What?”

“He had to– How’d he memorize it?!” Wilbur snaps. Thinking this hard feels near impossible. He has no idea if any of this makes sense, if he’s coherent or not.

“I don’t–” Punz frowns, clearly thinking it over. He hadn’t thought about it. “I don’t know.”

“Fuck– Punz, just kill me, now,” Wilbur says weakly. “*Now, please!*”

Punz refocuses on him, “*what?*” Wilbur is *not* being sarcastic.

“Can’t– I can’t help him, not like this, you need to– Kill me, bring me back, we both know I won’t win, but I can– for Tommy, I want to try. Please just– I’m halfway there, man,” an almost slurred laugh, the action making Wilbur feel like needles are being jabbed through the back of his skull. “End it.”

Punz stares at him. He walks toward Wilbur, and then right past him into the corridor.

“Please,” Wilbur tries once more, “please...” Punz is already gone, it’s all he can do anymore.

~

“*Wilbur!*”

Dream laughs, wheezing and sharp, dragging Tommy back, throwing him to the ground.

“Holy *shit*, Tommy, you bash his fucking head in, and then you cry for him to come *save* you, that’s *pathetic*, even for you.”

Tommy doesn’t know what he’s hoping for. He’s tired of being passive in his suffering, but his desperate, futile efforts only remind him that this was never a matter of trying hard enough, he never had any control. “H-He can– *You* said, if he can’t do the job, you would– But if he–”

“But he *couldn't* do the job, right? You made sure of that, didn't you?”

Tommy struggles to his feet. He knows he cannot hope to fight Dream, how easy it would be for Dream to knock him to the ground again, but it's the only move he can make. He doesn't want to just curl up in a ball and wait for it to be over, he doesn't know what there's left for him to want. Tommy doesn't reply. He waits, still glancing to the doorway like he's still waiting for his big brother to come save him, or even Punz to grow a heart.

“Now, Tommy. You gave me a lot to think about earlier. This wasn't *really* part of the plan before, but you're right. This was all about *choice*, wasn't it? I told you how important your choice in all this was to me,” Dream holds a hand over his heart, sympathies patronizing and mocking.

Tommy is having a hard time listening. Honestly, he can't be fucking bothered at this point, either Dream moves towards him or he doesn't, the rest is a wash. Dream notices his lack of processing, but he doesn't scold him for it.

“Hm. Maybe I should just do what you're waiting for, huh? Just to clear the air a bit, help you *focus*,” Dream says and even then, Tommy is not listening. He gets what he was waiting for, though. Dream steps toward him.

Tommy is wired like a spring, backing away with each step Dream takes forward. Dream doesn't have his axe or a sword, and that only aids in Tommy's terror. Tommy was planning on doing *something*, maybe trying to hit Dream, maybe running, but he doesn't even get the chance to move. Dream doesn't grab him. He swings, and Tommy ducks, because he'd been waiting for that, and then Dream knocks his feet out from under him easily, with the exact same move Tommy had used to keep Wilbur down minutes ago. Tommy lies on his back, the wind knocked out of him, head pounding. He hadn't wanted to be on the ground. He'd wanted to stay standing, because on the ground meant—

Tommy chokes on a scream he has no air for as Dream's netherite boot shatters a rib. Tommy tries to sit up, the moment he puts his hand down to support his weight, his fingers are broken underneath Dream's heel.

Even this, Tommy is still waiting for the other shoe to drop. This is *nothing*. From Dream, this is a *scolding*. Tommy stays down. He does what he can, curling into a ball, trying to protect himself.

Dream doesn't allow it, easily getting him moving again dragging him off the ground by his hair.

“S-Sorry—” Tommy doesn't know why he says it. Impulse, habit, but he isn't even sure if Dream heard him as the man shoves him back into a chair. Dream grabs Tommy's left wrist, the band of metal, more importantly the ring underneath it. He locks it to the chair with a bit of chain as was its intended purpose. Tommy could still stand if he tried, at an awkward angle with a heavy chair he's probably too emaciated to lift tied to him, so Tommy doesn't move. He stays in his seat and waits.

“Are you paying attention now?” Dream drags out another chair, it scraping painfully against the stone floor. He sits across from him. “No more running for it or whatever you think you can do? You’re not going anywhere, Wilbur is currently concussed on the floor thanks to you, so now it’s time for you to at least pretend to be sane and listen.”

Tommy stares, he doesn’t say a word, he waits. This is a lot of prelude for torture, maybe unsurprising considering Dream’s ego, but it definitely adds irritation to the fear.

“Alright, good,” Dream leans back, hands folded in his lap. “I don’t want to get too philosophical here, but like I said, your choice in all this is *very* important to me. You even said, lack of choice was what made... well, it made it so my lessons didn’t always *stick*,” Dream shrugs. “But that’s on me, Tommy. You’re right. *I’ve* been the one to get boring, lately, huh?”

Tommy waits, forced to accept that the biggest threat to him right now is going to come from Dream’s words. He has to pay attention.

“How about you nod if you’re listening, hm? Come on, common courtesy, I’m even letting you keep your scared-animal mutism by not having you say *yes, Dream*, like a good apostle should— apostle? Follower?” Dream considers it for a moment, “born-again, worshiper? Devotee? Sorry, doesn’t matter, but, either way, nod.”

Tommy doesn’t move.

Like a lightning strike, without warning or indication, Dream slaps him across the face. “Are you deaf? I just don’t *understand you* sometimes. Not responding gets you hit, responding doesn’t *do* any harm, like, just *nod*. It’s not that hard.”

Tommy’s jaw aches, even his teeth hurt. He huffs, almost a weary sigh. He nods.

“See? Not so hard, right? Where was I— see, you get annoying, Tommy, you *distract* me, it’s just— *everything* you do causes trouble, doesn’t it?” Dream tuts him. “I was..?” He snaps his fingers, trying to remember.

“You’ve gotten boring?” Tommy supplies dully. This torment has gotten so *slow*. It doesn’t make it easier, instead it makes it harder for Tommy to figure out what to do with his adrenaline and his heart racing like a jackhammer.

“There we are! See, I knew you were paying attention,” Dream sits back again. “Anyway. Let’s get back to *choice*, shall we? So, Tubbo or Ranboo?”

~

Punz returns. He stares down at Wilbur. “Why do you want to do this? Die, come back, go after Dream, you said it yourself, you’re not gonna *win*. So, why?”

Wilbur squints up at him. He doesn’t know if Punz had gone to get a book or not, nor if he’s going to use it.

“At the risk of sounding cliché,” Wilbur, sounding as aloof as he can manage, which isn’t saying much. “You wouldn’t get it. And I am too concussed for a more compelling argument, so, either kill me, or fuck off.”

Punz stares at him, calculating, and for a moment Wilbur thinks he might have swayed him. “There wasn’t a book in there. I’d have to ask Dream for one.”

Wilbur smirks, it looks more like a grimace. “Cute,” his voice is weak and pained and nonetheless snarky.

Punz’s arms are folded over his chest as he shifts from foot to foot, irritated. “*Both* of you, acting like *I’m* the naive one here, from the guy *begging* to fight Dream, like,” Punz huffs. “I swear sometimes it’s like you two really are brothers...”

“We are.”

“Um, no, last I checked, *you* were Philza’s kid, and—”

“Like I said. You wouldn’t... you wouldn’t understand,” Wilbur is still talking with surprising coherency. He gets optimistic, or maybe just desperate. He tries to sit up again. He at least manages to roll over on his side when he pukes. “F-Fuck...” Wilbur shuts his eyes, trying to breathe through the pain and the feeling that the room is tilting around him. His mouth tastes like blood, salt, and fish. He sort of wants to puke again.

Punz is still thinking it over carefully. “I could still kill you. Dream would have to bring you back at some point, right?”

“N-No, *you* need to... I can’t trust him to... you know, who knows, you know, who, you, I...” Wilbur trails off, incoherent for a moment. He tries to concentrate, every thought painful. “*You know* what Dream... could do to him... in that time... If you kill me, you’ve got to say you’ll try to... try to get me back.”

“Why does it sound like you trust me?”

Wilbur opens his eyes, squinting at Punz in some woozy approximation of exasperation. “S-Short on options, aren’t I..?” His eyelids feel heavy and close once more. He’s beginning to think he’s only conscious from his guilty conscience and sheer willpower. “He told me I had to, you know.”

“What?” Punz scowls.

“Hit Tommy. Dream did. He said if I didn’t he was gonna hurt him worse, and that’s what’s happening now,” Wilbur sighs, keeping his eyes closed. If Punz doesn’t kill him, he might as well stop fighting unconsciousness. “He’s hurting him worse because I failed. So, yeah. Even if it doesn’t save him, might as well kill me for that at least.”

“Dream...” Punz trails off, dots half-connected now righting themselves. “He told you to. And I’m guessing Tommy didn’t know that bit.”

“Obviously not.”

“Right,” Punz can’t be bothered to reckon with the discomfort this causes him, horror has become mundane and easy to bury. And still, Wilbur’s request remains, and the thought of Dream getting punched by Wilbur before he inevitably puts the man down just feels like a bonus at this point. Punz doesn’t see a loss for himself in this situation. He does want a copy of the revive book, and it’s not like he is under any obligation to keep his word. “Fine.”

“Cool...” Wilbur murmurs, giving some feeble motion Punz recognizes as a thumbs up as he circles him. “How’re you gonna—?”

Punz kicks Wilbur in the side of the head. His fractured skull does the rest.

~

Dream had said he would stop being boring, that he would do something to make Tommy actually react again, and as he always professes, he’s good to his word.

“What?” Tommy says hoarsely. He stares at him, stares at that white mask like somehow it’s an expression he can read, a weight pressing down on his chest.

Dream repeats, pretending that Tommy’s issue was mishearing him. “I said, *Tubbo or Ranboo*? Simple, right? Easy. Tubbo, or Ranboo.”

“No,” Tommy *has* to play the game now, he has to know. “No, you’ve got to explain, what’s— What’s the *choice*?”

“I mean, I don’t *really* have to explain.”

“Do you—” Tommy doesn’t want to ask. He doesn’t. But how can he not? “Where are they? What the fuck have you done with them?!”

“Whoa, *whoa*, ” Dream lets out another infuriating, wheezing laugh, sitting up, raising his hands passively. “I don’t have them tucked away somewhere, god, could you imagine the upkeep on top of keeping you and your idiotic brother in line? But I mean, I do know where they are, obviously.”

“Why would you risk going back to the main parts of the server?! You have actually, properly disappeared, why would you risk losing that fucking security? What’s the fucking *point*?” Tommy is more cognizant now than he has been in days, even if he doesn’t know what he can actually do, he will return to himself if it means protecting Tubbo and Ranboo.

“Tommy,” Dream sounds almost pitying, resting his chin on his hand, arm lazily draped over the table. “For *you*? My best buddy? It’s *worth* the risk.”

Tommy shudders, disgust joining dread. “You’re— No, you’re insane—”

“Besides, it’s not as hard as you seem to think,” Dream scoffs. “I don’t even know if they’re recovered from what I did— sorry, what *Punz* did, gotta give fair credit— to L’Manberg. They’re all scared, half of them are injured, I show up, take my pound of flesh, I disappear before poor little Tubbo— or Ranboo— can cry for help. Your faith in them is touching, but I thought we’d established *I* am the only thing you can put your faith in.”

“Tell me—” Tommy swallows thickly, mouth very dry, as Dream gets exactly what he wanted. Responsibility, choice, and harm to the people Tommy loves. It’s the perfect recipe to get him back to playing the game by Dream’s rules. “Tell me what you’re asking then, okay? I’ll— I’ll answer, I’ll choose, but— but it’s not really a choice if I don’t know, is it? Might as well be a coin toss, that’s not— that’s *easy*, that’s not me playing the game,” even as Tommy says it he realizes it’s true. Maybe it would’ve been easier if he hadn’t known what he was deciding.

“Fine. That’s fair,” Dream sighs, thinking it over. “The name you say is who I hurt. I won’t tell you how I hurt them, maybe I’ll kill them, maybe I’ll just hurt them *really really* badly, but I want you to say it. Don’t say the name of the person you’re sparing, tell me who *you* want me to hurt. You decide.”

“I don’t— I don’t *want* this—” Tommy says weakly.

“No, you know what I meant. Don’t try to talk your way out of it, between the two people, the name you say, that’s the one you want hurt. That’s just a fact. Even if it’s because of your pathetic *oh, I don’t want the other one to get hurt*, reasons, it’s still you wanting that. Are we clear on the rules, then? Simple enough even your tiny brain can understand? Good. In that case, Tommy, back to the question. Tubbo, or Ranboo?”

Tommy feels like Dream might be right, he feels like his brain is about to break.

“Honestly, no rush. But like, obviously this isn’t the only choice you’re gonna make, so, the longer you take, the longer this is gonna be, and that just extends the time it takes for me to get to your punishment, so, actually, sure. We could make this chat go on for hours, you can put it off,” Dream shrugs.

Tommy vaguely registers that Dream said *get to your punishment* implying this *isn’t* the punishment, implying there’s something worse, but Tommy doesn’t care about whatever elaborate means Dream has concocted to kill him or whatever, Dream doesn’t grasp that nothing could be worse than this.

“And I feel like it should be obvious, but to be clear, if you don’t choose, I hurt them both. That will be a *lot* of work for me, Tommy. A *lot* of work,” Dream sighs. “Already, since obviously I gotta space this out, plan ahead, it’s going to take *weeks*, but also, okay this kind of spoils some of the surprise, but also not really, but like, your punishment is only going to end once I’ve gone through the list and hurt all the ones you’ve chosen, or all of them if you don’t choose, okay?”

Tommy is frozen. His eyes are watering. Somehow this feels like the most and least pathetic thing he’s cried over lately.

“Aw, Tommy, it’s okay! I can see you’re trying,” Dream feigns sympathy. “How about this, I think I probably started too strong with Tubbo and Ranboo right out of the gate, so we’ll get back to them. Let me start smaller. Hm,” Dream considers it. “This one I think is obvious, but you know, your choice. And like, the two I pit against each other, don’t overthink it too much, okay? So, first choice: Phil or Eret?”

Tommy stares at him, mostly puzzled now.

“I know, I know, feels sorta random, I ran out of pairs that made sense, and we’re going out of order now,” Dream concedes, hands raised passively. “And I’ll admit, Technoblade, the obvious choice to put with Phil, but I’m not stupid enough to try and go after him.”

“Stupid to go after Phil...” Tommy mutters.

“Was that your answer?”

“No,” Tommy says quickly.

“Good,” Dream keeps this unnerving almost friendly tone, even as he leans forward and grabs Tommy’s free hand.

“What–?” Tommy cries out as Dream snaps his pinky finger with a horrible crack, his index and middle already crushed earlier under Dream’s boot.

“Don’t call me stupid,” Dream says mildly. “Oh, and you called me insane earlier, so, y’know,” Dream holds on tighter as Tommy now tries to pull away. Dream breaks his ring finger, Tommy screams, not bothering to choke back whimpering sobs. Physical pain is so simple, but he can’t stop himself from reacting, especially when he’s already so worn down. Dream continues, the violence a mere footnote to his current torment. “Do you have an answer?”

Tommy’s eyes stream, the pain nauseating and definitely not helping him focus, but again, awfully, infuriatingly, Dream isn’t wrong. It’s an easy choice, even if he wishes it wasn’t. Phil has one life, Eret has three. Or at least had three the last Tommy checked.

“Eret,” Tommy chokes out, their name spoken feels like a betrayal, the irony of which is not lost on him.

“Okay, good! I thought so too,” Dream has the audacity, the cruelty, to seem pleased with Tommy’s choice. “Okay, Sam or Ponk?”

Another easy choice, even if it pains him. He also knows it’s the choice Sam would want him to make. As far as Tommy is aware, and there’s every chance he’s wrong by now, but Ponk has already lost a life, back when Tommy had first been taken, or left, and Sam should still have three. He also knows Sam will always prefer he takes the hits for Ponk, hence:

“Sam.”

“Got it, yeah. Fair enough. Ponk is... a lot more breakable than Sam. Physically, at least, mentally?” Dream considers it. “Sam is... shockingly fragile.”

Tommy is reminded there had been a time where Dream had been friends with many of these people. He wonders when— *if* George or Sapnap’s names will come up on this list.

“How about Bad or Ant? Oh! And a little fun fact for you, if I end up killing them, which I haven’t decided yet, really, again, plenty of pain out there that’s survivable, you know that,

but Bad is a two-for-one. I *have* to kill Skeppy in order to kill Bad.”

Tommy hates this. Worse, he hates how *easy* it is. Okay. Choosing Bad means Skeppy loses a life too, therefore:

“Ant.”

“Got it, can do! Maybe I should be writing this down, but I think I can remember them all. Eret, Sam, Ant. Cool,” Dream nods like he’s remembering a grocery list.

Tommy feels sick and not just from the pain, even as his hand throbs and every breath is a stab to the chest from his busted ribs. *Maybe he’ll get caught. Maybe these choices, maybe these are what get you and Wil out of here.*

Tommy almost hates himself more for the thought. Dream isn’t just making him behave in a manner cruel and calculating and dehumanizing to people he cares for, but he’s making him selfish as well.

“I genuinely don’t know where Fundy has disappeared to, which is annoying, going through the original L’Manbergians would’ve been fun, I mean that’s who I was originally gonna pair with Eret, but regardless, still a few to pick from: Niki or Jack?” Dream asks.

Now it gets harder. As far as Tommy knows, Niki has three lives. But Niki lost her leg in an explosion. And of course, a burden Tommy had almost left behind when he lost his freedom, but apparently not quite, he had killed Jack. He doesn’t actually know how many lives Jack has left, but he’s at least down one. According to Punz, Niki had survived the explosion. She should have three lives. Tommy wants to hurt something. Maybe himself. Probably himself. Niki doesn’t deserve this pain. None of them do. Tommy almost tries to bury his sobs, but what’s the fucking *point*? To stop Dream from making fun of him? He’ll do that either way.

“Tommy?” Dream dares to feign concern.

“Why don’t you just hurt me? P-Please—” A shaky inhale, Tommy not looking at Dream, staring instead through blurry vision at the damp stone floor, not really seeing it. “Why don’t you just hurt me, Dream? Please, *p-please*,” Tommy knows his prayers are worthless, but he begs anyway. He doesn’t know what else to do with this hurt inside of him. “Please whatever you’re gonna do to them, just hurt *me*, okay? Y-You know how to hurt me really bad, that’s— why can’t that be enough, Dream? Please, I came with you, a-and I came out here willingly, why’d you have to bring them into it?! *Why?*”

“Oh, Tommy,” Dream says with a gentleness that is terribly, eerily sincere. Tommy flinches, swallowing his sobs immediately as Dream reaches out, but he doesn’t hit him, merely brushes away tears. “I already *have* done all these things to you. It’s just like you said. That just doesn’t cut it anymore, right?”

Tommy shuts his eyes tightly, curling his hands into fists, letting the pain of his broken fingers ground him, even as the thought circles, piercing and cruel, *your fault your fault your fault—*

“You’ve got to say who, Tommy, or I hurt them both. So, Niki or Jack?”

Tommy hears himself speak, but he feels disconnected from it. “Niki.” Not disconnected enough.

“*Niki?*” Dream sounds surprised. “Huh. *Niki* over Jack... didn’t see that one coming, actually. You always acted like you were better than Jack. And acted like Niki was some cool older sister.”

“You don’t know *anything*,” Tommy has enough of himself left to share his hatred with Dream. “You don’t get to act like you know what they are to me, you don’t get to make me choose *and* act like you know fucking *anything* at the same time,” Tommy snarls. Dream sits up, Tommy beats him to it. “Go ahead, Dream. Break my fuckin’ fingers, why don’t you? What’s one more, ay?!” He leans forward, hissing a last proclamation like it’s a defense, “I’m *tired*.”

Dream pauses, the two of them staring at each other, Tommy knowing he hasn’t won, but he’ll act like his numbness is worth something. Dream speaks, calm, unbothered, infuriating, “got it. Both of them, then.”

Again, Tommy crumbles so easily. “What?”

“Like you said, breaking your fingers isn’t getting the message across, I’m trying to teach you, and it isn’t working. Y’know, teach you that you don’t talk back to me, you don’t act all high and mighty, I am your *God*, remember? So, if that little reminder isn’t enough, okay. That’s alright, Tommy. But I’m going to hurt both of them now. Niki and Jack. Don’t try to apologize now, I can see you’re going to, but you need to *learn*, Tommy. You can’t keep acting rash and impulsively. There are consequences for your actions. Honestly, I can’t believe you haven’t learned that by now.”

There’s nothing Tommy can say. No apologies he can give, no begging that will work, so he stays silent. He tries to tear himself apart from the inside out.

Dream is not finished with him yet. “Back to the beginning! Almost there, Tommy. So, again: Tubbo, or Ranboo?”

Another choice which Tommy wishes didn’t feel easy. Tubbo has one life, Ranboo, as far as he knows has three.

“Ranboo.”

“A lot quicker that time, huh?” Dream has the audacity to sound smug. “It’s all just logic, isn’t it? I thought you’d be all emotional, pick favorites, but that wasn’t it, was it? You were smart about it, you went with who you think is less breakable.”

Tommy wants to again protest Dream thinking he knows *anything* going on in Tommy’s head, even if he’s irritatingly right, but the last time he protested did not go well for him, so he holds his tongue.

“We’re almost out of questions,” Dream almost sounds sorry for him. “This is gonna get a lot harder.”

Tommy is not frightened by what comes after, but by what questions could remain. What could Dream place above Tubbo and Ranboo? What could be more painful? Tommy doesn’t dare ask something so blatant, but nonetheless. “What do you have left?”

“Surprised you’re in such a *rush*, Tommy. But okay, last one. So: why don’t you go home?”

Tommy doesn’t think he’s processing Dream’s words properly. “...What?”

“Why don’t you go home?” Dream repeats again, still too calm, like this is a question on the weather, and not on what it means to be brothers. “Leave Wilbur here. Like I said, Tommy, your choice. I could take you home right now. And then I would make Wilbur pay for it to the *best* of my ability.”

Tommy cannot read his soulless face for sincerity, but Tommy does some calculating. Dream assumes he will stay here, and his question is not an offer, it’s a hypothetical. Tommy calls his bluff. “Nah, I don’t think so, Dream. You won’t let me go because you need me for something. That’s why you’re having me memorize the revive book.”

Dream hums, mulling it over. He sighs. “Yeah. Okay, fair. Fine, I just wanted to see if you’d given up on him yet, y’know?” Dream leans back in his chair, utterly at ease. Tommy still doesn’t know what he’s planning. He hates it when it takes so *long*. “I mean, I’d say he’s given up on *you*, after that cheap way out he tried to get earlier.”

Dream continues, voicing aloud his musings. “You know, Tommy. You’ve become so *interesting* lately, d’you know that?” He looks over at him, and Tommy tries to keep his expression flat, unaffected. “You think you’re being defiant, or... or brave, right?” Dream is condescending, like someone amused by a child playing pretend. “I don’t think it’s doing what you think it is, Tommy. Actually, this is the most exciting thing to happen down here in ages.” Dream sits up, and Tommy leans back. “You brought the game back to life! Ha, ironically enough.” Dream waits, Tommy doesn’t respond. “You trying to be a zombie again, Tommy?” Dream reaches out, lightly slapping his cheek, as if trying to wake him. “All it took was me saying your defiance is getting you nowhere, and you’re back to just... trying to be a boring empty shell or whatever. You know that’s dangerous too, right?”

“I don’t understand– I don’t understand it, I just–” Tommy cuts himself off, feeling choked up already. He doesn’t want to give Dream the excuse to make fun of him. “I don’t know what you want from me, Dream. You got pissed off when I gave you shit, and now you’re upset that I’m not reacting enough, you– why can’t you just tell me what you want?!” Tommy hates how weak he sounds, he’s pleading. “I-I would do what you wanted, I *would*, if it meant you weren’t gonna hurt them, if it meant this all was gonna hurt *less*, I would be good, I swear it. I just– Just *tell me* what you want!”

Dream laughs. “Shit, Tommy. There isn’t some trick to it. I don’t like it when you’re boring, and you trying to defy me is interesting, but still something I have to punish. There isn’t a way for you to *win*, you see that, don’t you? I assumed that’s why you got extra bold earlier, you realized obeying wasn’t gonna get you anywhere. I guess you just have to

decide, right? If it's gonna do less harm obeying me, or if you might as well cause problems and give me an excuse to hurt you worse." Dream stands and Tommy leans away, but it's not like there's anywhere for him to go chained to a chair. "And you'll have a lot of time to think on that choice, while I go through my list. Just to double check— it's Eret, Sam, Ant, Niki, *and* Jack of course, and Ranboo. Got it. Not too bad of a list, I don't think. Maybe I'll like, leave a calling card or something so they know it was your fault."

Tommy feels like he's only barely starting to grasp the faces attached to those names and the harm coming for them. There's nothing he could have done, there's nothing he can do now, but it's crushing him. There is no answer he will be able to make peace with, and yet: "what're you— What're you gonna do to them-?"

"Dream?"

"What?" Dream turns around to face Punz standing in the doorway. "Can't you see I'm busy?"

Punz frowns, scanning the room. He's confused to see Tommy, a little rough but far from excessively wounded considering, and still looking distraught. "I need a revive book."

"Why? Why the fuck do you need a revive book, Punz? You're asking me this *now*?" Dream is clearly irritated at being interrupted.

Punz frowns, turning his gaze from Tommy back to Dream. "Wilbur died. I assumed you wouldn't want him in Limbo without your say-so, hence," he extends a hand. "I wanted a book to bring him back."

"Wilbur died?" Dream says it like Punz has just offered him a winning lottery ticket, downright *gleeful*. "Seriously? Just, succumbed to his injuries or whatever? You're not messing with me, right?"

Punz stares at him, eyebrows furrowed, wary. "No. No, I'm not, so, will you give me a book or—"

"One second, one sec one sec," Dream shushes him, talking over him as he turns on his heels back to Tommy, hands clapped together now. "You're following what I'm following, aren't you? Aren't you, Tommy?"

Tommy has receded back into his own head, running through the newly curated lists of names, he's at least processing the words, but other than that he has no idea what Dream is talking about. He mutely shakes his head, staring, glassy eyed, at the floor.

"Tommy, this is important to me, I want to see your face," Dream puts his hands on Tommy's shoulders, forcing him to sit up and look at him. "You with me?"

Tommy sort of nods, but he might just be unsteady, Dream will accept it as good enough.

"Okay, okay good, Tommy, you—" Dream is horribly giddy, he actually has to pause, steel himself to say it. "*You killed your brother.*"

Tommy stares at him, unresponsive.

“Got it?” Dream continues, shaking him slightly. “Come on, d’you follow, Tommy? You just *killed your fucking brother*, like, *wow*, Tommy! Even I didn’t think we’d get this far! At least not so soon, but what do you know! I mean, I wish we’d been there to see it, and I wish you weren’t a fucking catatonic slug right now, but it’s gotta sink in eventually, right? You killed your brother, Tommy. *You* killed Wilbur. *You*. ”

Tommy opens his mouth to speak, but it’s like his mind has been emptied of all words, there is only pain, and some of it must show on his expression as Dream watches him.

“Yes,” Dream says delightedly. “You killed him! In cold blood, while he barely fought back, and you— and you had the audacity to ask him for *help*!” Dream is bordering on mania, stepping back, gesturing grandly as he speaks, “that almost makes me want to celebrate instead of burying you alive!”

Dream stops. The silence extends for a moment and Tommy is almost short circuiting by the conflicting horrors consuming him. Dream is almost *apologetic*, scuffing his feet on the ground as Tommy and Punz just watch on. “Aw, come on, I was trying not to spoil the surprise, but well, we’re almost there anyway.”

Punz is staring at him, almost as aghast as Tommy and at least coherent enough to protest. “He’ll be dead in minutes.”

“No, no not necessarily,” Dream raises his hands as if to placate Punz. “I’ve got like, I’ve got a coffin set up, and I was thinking of using an old scrap of pipe so he can still breathe, something like that. Obviously, he’s gonna be buried down *here*, so, digging the hole was trickier, but I got it all figured out, don’t even worry about it, Punz! I might need your help getting him in the box, though.” Dream fake-whispers to him, “Tommy is a *bit* of a pussy when it comes to enclosed spaces.”

“And... how long are you planning on...” Punz stops, a heavy sigh. “What is it exactly you’re planning?”

“I’ll explain *later*, okay?” Dream searches his inventory, returning with a copy of the revive book. “Alright, here, Punz. This might end up killing Tommy, might not I dunno yet, but I don’t want them together, so,” Dream hands Punz the book. “Once he’s back, you can just throw him in his cell or whatever. Tell him what I’m doing to Tommy, or don’t. Or maybe just pause a minute before you lock him up so he can hear Tommy screaming. The kid can’t stay this catatonic for long. He’s going to freak out the moment I actually start putting him in a box.”

Punz accepts the book, but he doesn’t leave just yet. “Where are you burying him?”

“In the farm, obviously. Only place with soil.”

Punz nods slowly. He very deliberately doesn’t look at Tommy. “Right, got it,” Punz sighs and turns to leave.

“Please, please don’t–” Tommy finally speaks, and it’s largely due to the hard to process fact that Punz can bring himself to walk away. “Punz, please don’t let him!” Tommy shouts after him, standing, tugging on the chain attached to his wrist. “*Punz, please! Please stop him!*”

“Tommy!” Dream grabs Tommy’s free arm. “Calm down. You’re not gonna change anything. Save your breakdown for when Wilbur can hear it, alright?”

Tommy stares at him, breathing frantic and shaky. He’s still staring at Dream as he continues to fall into futile efforts. “*Somebody! Please help me!*”

“Alright, well, gotta get this show on the road, I guess,” Dream says like this is a mild chore to him and nothing more. Dream pins Tommy’s right arm behind him, fingers still broken, and unlocks his left. Tommy tries to twist free, not caring the pain it causes his wrists, then he tries kicking Dream. He pauses when Dream hits him upside the head, and before he can resume his efforts, Dream defaults to the reliable method of dragging Tommy down the hall by his hair.

Tommy screams, in part pain, in part outrage, in part just some instinct to not go down without a fight as he throws himself forward, trying to knock Dream over, to get him to let go, but Dream only holds on tighter.

“*Help!*” Tommy screams again. He doesn’t know who he’s expecting to save him. “*Help me!*” Tommy keeps struggling even as Dream drags him around the corner into the room that still cruelly manages to smell almost like being outside.

Tommy hasn’t been here in a long time, he hasn’t been able to locked in a cell. All of the wheat has been ripped up, and the soil dug up with it. There’s a box laid beside it, just big enough for a body. It had been waiting here for him all this time, Dream waiting for when Wilbur would inevitably be too weak to do the job.

“*HELP ME! PLEASE FUCKING HELP ME!*” Tommy screams until his throat feels raw, sobs choking him as he tries to get Dream to let go, tries to drag himself toward the doorway despite the pain. “*HELP–*” Tommy’s efforts are cut off when Dream instead grabs him by his throat, holding him far enough away that try as he might, Tommy cannot claw at Dream’s face. He still tries, kicking weakly at the air, weak grip only able to reach Dream’s armor which is like trying to fend off a brick wall.

“How the fuck can you still scream that loud? Shouldn’t your vocal chords be damaged or something?” Dream squeezes tighter until Tommy stops trying to reach his face, instead desperately fumbling to loosen his grip enough that he can breathe. “Don’t *worry*, Tommy. It’s not *forever*. Just however long it takes for me to take a piece out of... let’s see if I remembered them all, huh? Eret, Sam, Ant, Niki, Jack, and Ranboo! It’s simple, right?”

Tommy cannot even whimper with Dream crushing his throat, his vision blurs, maybe tears, maybe his consciousness is already fitting, his lungs are starting to burn, and screaming with broken ribs is punishing in itself. He’s barely paying attention to Dream’s taunts now, maybe it’s selfish, but he doesn’t fucking care at this point, he doesn’t care about whoever Dream is planning on hunting down, he doesn’t care about Wilbur dead down the hall by his own

fucking hand, all he cares about is doing whatever it takes to keep himself out of that fucking box.

Dream sets him down beside his new coffin, but before Tommy can move, try to run, try *anything*, Dream stands behind him, holding his arms pinned to his sides. He hates how easy it is for Dream to move him like he's nothing more than a toy, but Tommy's struggling at least does something. Dream is trying to knock him over, to force him to the ground, to get him in that fucking box, but Tommy's scrawny limbs are doing their best not to yield, to keep his footing, Dream tries picking him up again and Tommy uses the leverage to try to kick the box away, to break it, but all this does is slow the inevitable.

"Please! I'll be good! I swear I'll be good!" Tommy keeps pleading even as he knows this is not something he can beg his way out of, even as every word hurts, his throat aching and sure to bruise, but it's all he can do.

"Punz!" Dream shouts over his shoulder. "Punz, give me a hand in here!" There is no reply. "Fuck it, you know what—" Dream still holds onto him with one arm around his throat, but his other arm lets go. And then Tommy feels a knife in his back. Tommy keeps struggling, agony almost blinding, but he still writhes around the pain, he cannot stop. Tommy is too breathless to scream when Dream rips out the knife. He knows why Dream took the knife out, for the same reason he'd stabbed him there in the first place. It's because he's still moving.

Tommy gasps as Dream plunges the knife into his back again. This time it hits the mark, somewhere close enough to his spinal cord to break him.

"Please..." Tommy says weakly. It's all he can manage, half of his body numb and the rest feels almost like fire. Maybe this will kill him. It's too much to hope for, and even if it does, Dream will just bring him back once he's nailed in. His fingertips, his arms in general feel tingly, but he can at least feel them, so he tries to push Dream away as the man picks him up, but there is no strength left behind the action, especially through the agony of Dream moving him, laying him down like he's putting a child to bed.

"There we go, much easier without you flailing around like it's gonna stop me," Dream says, almost scolding. "Alright, now, Tommy. You're probably gonna die soon, and when that happens, I'll bring you back! So the next time you wake up, you'll probably already be six feet under, okay? Well, more like four feet, we're working with what we have, here," Dream says cheerfully as he lays Tommy's hands across his chest, where he still barely continues to breathe. "And *you* said I was running out of ideas..." Dream chuckles, pulling the sheet of wood over Tommy. The world gets darker, save only for a circle of light just above Tommy's head.

Wherever Dream had stabbed him, it was low enough he still has some control over his arms, so Tommy tries to move his arm up toward the light, but he's having a hard time bending it enough to move it in such a small space. It's *tiny*. It's smaller than an actual fucking coffin should be. Tommy can feel the wood pressing in on him, inches from his body. Tommy thinks if he were less paralyzed he would have flinched when Dream began to nail down the lid. The sound rings around him, sharp and painful, all there is is the pain of the knife wound

as well as the numbness, the feeling of wood pressing in on him, and that sound ripping through him, a nail in his skull as well as the crate.

Tommy dies somewhere in the process of Dream sealing the coffin. The sound finally stops and Tommy no longer feels the wood against his skin and instead there is only emptiness, only darkness, only *blissful* silence. He thought maybe that meant he would get to see his brother. He'd killed him, after all.

He'd killed his brother.

Fuck. Already, reckoning with the violence he inflicted on his brother is hard enough, but *this?* It's wrong in every way he can fathom it. Dream really found a way to cut them away from each other, just as he said he would. Tommy doesn't recognize himself anymore. He doesn't want to be this way, he knows he wasn't always like this. Tommy didn't used to be so angry. He didn't always find it so easy to hurt people. He never wanted to be what Dream made of him, but maybe he never had a chance just as he never had a choice.

Wilbur isn't here. He is alone. And he is going to return to the living world alone. And Dream is going to hurt people he cares for, just because he can. Tommy can stretch his limbs here, he can move, he can feel, but even this infinity isn't enough to make him feel like he isn't being buried alive.

~

Wilbur gasps awake after several agonizing hours in Limbo. Punz is standing over him, looking solemn.

"You're not gonna be able to stop him," Punz says immediately.

Wilbur's head still hurts, but he's miles better than he was. He struggles to sit up. "W-Where are—" Wilbur tries to stand, almost falling over, but managing. "Where are they?"

"Down the hall. In the farm, if you know where that is," Punz hesitates. He looks disturbed as he puts together words, as if expecting Wilbur to offer him some clarity. "He said... He said he was going to bury him. Bury him alive, I mean."

Wilbur is already running. He takes a gamble, he vaguely remembers seeing green toward the end of the corridor, and he arrives in time to see Dream standing over a grave.

Maybe he should've been quiet, tried to be careful, looked for a weapon, but Wilbur is running only on terror as he throws himself at Dream. Wilbur tackles him to the ground, surprise his only advantage, as he tries to keep Dream pinned down. He tries to grab Dream's head, intending to twist it until his neck snaps, he has the man pinned down on his stomach, he cannot reach back to grab Wilbur, but Wilbur is weak. Dream starts to turn, to throw Wilbur off, Wilbur knows he won't be able to keep him on the ground so instead he grabs Dream around the neck, holding onto him. Wilbur feels Dream tug on him and then the room is spinning above him and he's flat on his back, Dream having thrown him over his shoulder.

Dream gets to his feet unsteadily. “How did *you* get over here?!” It's like he's talking to a dog who's escaped its kennel.

Wilbur doesn't reply. He wants to look for Tommy. He's terrified of what he might find. He starts to get up and instead hits the ground again, blinding pain as Dream hits his head with a shovel, he sees stars and doesn't know if he'll be able to stand again.

Dream goes over to the corridor. “Punz! What the hell have you been doing?!”

Punz makes his way down the hall without urgency. “What, Dream? It's just *Wilbur*. It's not like he can do anything.”

“You did that on purpose, huh? Let him come after me?” Dream snaps. “What, that's just a funny prank to you? What if he'd killed me? You would've lost too.”

Punz stares at him, unfazed. “That wouldn't be a problem if you gave me the revive book.”

“Right, very encouraging, Punz.”

Behind them, Wilbur is trying to sit up again. He cannot look for Tommy, his vision is blurry. It better not be that he's totally destroyed his glasses now, despite the semantics, Tommy had been right. If his glasses break, he's blind. Wilbur finds his glasses on the ground beside him, he puts them on, trying to brush blood from his eyes, his forehead bleeding profusely.

“Tom– Tommy?!” Wilbur looks for his brother. He sees a newly filled in grave.

“He's dead, you fucking moron,” Dream sneers. “Six feet under, in fact,” Dream laughs. “Punz, are you gonna take care of him or not?”

“I have to take care of him, do I?” Punz says dryly.

“I mean, *I've* been taking care of Tommy,” Dream refers to the empty planter bed behind him. “Wilbur,” Dream speaks to him. “What're you trying to do, huh? D'you have a shovel? Didn't think so.”

“Y-You didn't, you didn't *actually* you *can't* have–” Wilbur is helpless. He's about to start clawing at the earth with his bare hands.

“If you give me a minute to get another revive book out I can prove it to you,” Dream says.

The only other evidence of his brother is the glint of metal, a pipe a few inches wide, Wilbur realizes, to ensure Tommy doesn't suffocate. “Oh my god– *Jesus fucking christ you're–* you're insane– *you're fucking insane–*”

“Yeah, sure, I've heard that one before.” Dream rummages in his inventory. “Punz, will you hold him? Pretty sure he's extra weak and concussed, but once Tommy starts screaming I think he'll go into overdrive or whatever.”

“Actually, I’m with Wilbur on this one, I think you’re fucking nuts. I don’t want to help you bury a kid alive, Dream,” Punz says.

“Well, I mean,” Dream gestures to the earth behind him. “I kind of already did that part, so you wouldn’t be helping me with it.”

Punz just gives him a hard stare, unwavering.

“Fine, if you want to *pout*, I’m not gonna stop you—” Dream turns back to Wilbur. “Hey! Stop that!” He hits Wilbur with the shovel again, as the man had actually started trying to dig. “God, you’re pathetic. It’s like trying to control a dog.”

Wilbur doesn’t respond, he remains collapsed on the floor with a second bloody head wound.

Punz watches on, neutral. “I think you knocked him out. Or he’s dead. Not sure which.”

“Aw, well. There will be plenty of other times for Wilbur to hear Tommy freaking out,” Dream has a revive book out.

“You don’t think burying him alive was excessive? You could have the same effect just locking him in a box,” Punz points out.

“You have *no* imagination, Punz.”

That brief, worthless conversation lasted maybe a minute. There was a one minute window of time where Wilbur and Tommy were both dead together, as yes, being hit over the head with a shovel *twice* is enough that Wilbur’s brain couldn’t keep going. That meant a little less than ten minutes for Wilbur and Tommy in Limbo.

They are thinking of each other, because of course they are, and Tommy finds it too easy to step into the light and join Wilbur on a train platform. It’s familiar now.

Two brothers stare at one another, frozen, unsure, and surely unwanted.

“I’m—” Wilbur doesn’t know how to begin. “I’m sorry.”

“Yeah,” Tommy hates that he sounds so wounded. “You probably should be.” A pause. “I’m sorry too.”

Wilbur looks genuinely puzzled. “What... what do *you* have to be sorry about?”

Tommy stares at him, as if waiting for him to reveal a joke. “Wil, I— I *hurt* you.”

Wilbur almost smiles, he nods. He tries to sound steady. It doesn’t really work. “And I— I hurt you first, didn’t I?”

A weighted silence. They both know they’re going to run out of time, but there is too much that needs said, things which need explained, and both of them unsure of how to bridge the gap.

“He’s– He said he was gonna hurt them,” Tommy cannot stop his voice from breaking, a lump in his throat.

“What?”

“Dream. He’s gonna– I dunno how, but he made me choose, and he’s gonna go back to the rest of the server, and he’s gonna– H-He’s gonna hurt Ranboo, and Eret and Sam and Ant. Niki and Jack too. And I don’t–” Tommy takes a shaky breath. “Did you know? Did you know what he was gonna do?”

“Not really,” Wilbur shrugs helplessly. “He just said he was going to hurt you. Do something terrible, if I didn’t– If I didn’t–” Wilbur can’t bring himself to say it.

“Yeah,” Tommy understands. “I get it. Even if I... I don’t want to get it.” Tommy sits on the edge of the platform, staring down at the tracks. “I don’t want you to have hit me, you know?”

Wilbur hesitates before sitting beside him, a foot of space between them. “Yeah. I didn’t know what to do and it’s– it’s not like I could ask you and– and it didn’t even matter, did it? Because I fucked up and now you’re–” Wilbur buries his face in his hands. “Oh *god*, Tommy, you’re–”

“I’m sorry I killed you,” Tommy says softly.

Wilbur looks up at him. “*What?*”

“Wil, I’m sorry I–”

And then the train station is gone. Tommy has returned to the dark, but not of Limbo. The wood is rough on his skin, earth falling through the cracks between the boards, and there remains a single beam of light, a thin trail up to the surface too far up for him to actually look to. He cannot move. What little he can move causes more dust and earth to fall onto him, to get into his eyes as he gasps for breath.

Tommy had had a grave once before. He hadn’t wanted it then. He certainly doesn’t want it now. As always, he doesn’t have a choice.

Chapter End Notes

Everyone was like "Wow I'm so scared for the next chapter what could Dream be planning that's that bad??!!" and I was like oh fuck I think I've run out of ideas that I'm okay writing ah shit. And. Well. I think this does the job. I don't know why I'm like this. Anyway.

Sorry :)

Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

CW: claustrophobia, being buried alive, gore, injuries, descriptions of injuries, gore, dehydration, a little gore, oh and alcoholism.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The first three days are the worst of it.

Tommy thinks he handles himself quite gracefully, considering. Or rather, once he dies and instead it is the boredom eating away at him in Limbo he will think so. At present, with his heart still stubbornly beating on despite the crushing knowledge of several feet of earth pressing down on him, he isn't thinking much about his own behavior.

Tommy screams, first with words, however useless they might be.

"Let me out! Let me out! Please! Please I'm sorry! I'm so fucking sorry! Just let me out!"

"HELP ME! ANYONE! SOMEONE! PLEASE JUST HELP ME!"

"LET ME THE FUCK OUT! I'LL KILL YOU! I FUCKING SWEAR IT I'LL KILL YOU!"

Tommy has no target for his threats just as he has no hopes of them being fulfilled.

"I... I wanna go home..." He cannot even reach up to brush away tears in this tiny space. His shoulders hurt, bruised from him thrashing against the narrow walls. "I wanna go home... Please, *please* let me go home..." He will continue to beg, however softly, with bruised skin and bloodied fingernails, until his throat turns to sandpaper and he knows his pleading isn't audible to anyone including himself, that mantra consuming his barely conscious thought. *"I wanna go home..."*

Tommy is rewarded by the dark, and it is undeniably a relief. The constant hum of static on his skin is not all that of a change from the box, his limbs having fallen asleep already, unable to move. At least here he can lose some of the tension in his limbs, if he focuses enough to get a floor, even walk around. Even pacing that stupid fucking four block box was better than not being able to move at all. Tommy *has* gotten better at this, and soon he's laying on an endless floor of polished obsidian.

Tommy sits up, head spinning.

"F-Fuck..." He struggles to catch his breath despite no longer needing to breathe, stretching every limb, standing and jumping, taking up as much space as he can. *"Wooo! Ha!"* He screams, throat no longer raw, head no longer clouded by dehydration. Tommy shakes out

his limbs, irritated to know those pins and needles will not fade. It is a symptom of his Limbo and his alone, once he crosses over to Wilbur's, it fades. Tommy can manifest a floor for himself, create a torch, even a jukebox, but that pain, however dull, however mild, it never ends.

Tommy distracts himself easily enough. He *runs*, not even chasing a distant light, but just reveling in the feeling of his limbs moving freely.

Limbo is a limited sort of peace, but he'll take it, for a few days.

It doesn't last.

Dream comes back and checks on him at some point, he must have, as Tommy is *still* running when he returns to a grave, immediately punching the wood in front of him and his knee hitting it hard, his ankle throbs as it's bent by his brief efforts.

"No! No no no— *it's not fair!*" Tommy cries out weakly. He knows Dream must be nearby, he has no idea if he can hear him. "*Please! That's not fair! I died! It's not fucking fair!*"

At least it gets easier. Resurrection does not cure all ills, he returns half dead from dehydration. Dying again isn't an escape, merely a lull before Dream resurrects him again.

Yet again, his mortal body gives out and he returns to the dark. Tommy wants to focus on the relief of being here instead of in a grave, but it doesn't last. He doesn't want to be here. He doesn't want to be alone in the dark any more than a grave. He wishes he could find Wilbur, and if not Wilbur at least his train station. That sounds surely more bearable than the endless under-stimulation of just darkness. He feels like he should be able to find it, if he can find Ghostbur— fuck, *Ghostbur*. He's been here alone for a long time. Tommy is both desperate for company and terrified of what state he'll find the ghost in. Tommy doesn't know if Limbo can somehow sense his reluctance, but he can't seem to find the ghost or that Limbo anyway.

Tommy *tries* to think of MD, but he has a feeling his old friend is with his maybe-goddess girlfriend.

That leaves one more option.

Maybe Tommy *really* is desperate, or somehow Limbo is more attuned to his whims instead of just his most dire wants, but somehow he finds himself in a nasty gym.

"Oh no, not you," Tommy immediately knows where he is.

"What the fuck— What the fuck are *you* doing here?" Schlatt snarls, tossing aside some weights, his presidential suit soaked in sweat. "You interrupted my set! Get the fuck out!"

"I would fucking love to, but at this point I don't think I can!" Tommy shouts back. "You're a fucking disgusting miserable piece of shit and I don't want anything to do with you."

"And you're the most annoying, useless little brat on this side of the after-life and if I thought it were worth the fucking effort, I'd try to kill you again," Schlatt shoots back.

The two of them stop, staring at each other.

Death the great equalizer, they're both lonely and bored.

Schlatt sighs, sitting on the edge of his bench, pulling a paper bag out of who knows where with a bottle inside. He takes a swig. "So, you're dead again... what else is new. Update me, why don't you? You still spending all your time crying to Wilbur about what a big *mean bully* Dream is?" Schlatt says mockingly.

"You have no idea, you don't fucking know and you don't have the right—" Tommy tries to maintain his aggression, but it's like all the fight has drained out of him. It's drained out of Schlatt as well as the man doesn't even bother snapping back, just looks at him through red eyes, puffy from drink and overexertion, waiting unamused for Tommy to go on.

"I dunno about the rest of the world. I'm still fucking stuck. A-And I'm— I'm buried— F-Fuck— He buried me alive. Dream did. I-I'm stuck," Tommy says shakily. "I-I'm stuck and he's gonna bring me back a-and— oh *fuck*—"

"Well, actually, I wouldn't say buried alive, you moronic little brat," Schlatt chuckles. "You call this *alive*?"

"I was alive when he fucking buried me you piece of shit," Tommy spits.

"*Okay?* And? Dig yourself out then. If he's gonna bring you back, do something about it. Or, what, you're gonna sit around and wait for someone else to fix your problems like all you weak little *L Manberg schmucks*," Schlatt says lazily.

"*Dig myself out?* Y-Yeah, sure! *Sure*, I'll just get my fucking *shovel* then, why didn't I think of that?! *I am buried in a fucking grave you stupid bitch!* You stupid dead asshole!" Tommy screams himself hoarse.

"God, you're annoying..." Schlatt doesn't even give him the satisfaction of shouting back, as always more occupied with a bottle.

Tommy sits on the concrete floor, weary. "Yeah, less of a prick than you are at least..."

Schlatt sighs loudly. "Fuck! Fine, I'll take pity on you."

"What?"

"I'll tell you how to dig yourself out. It's not hard. Well, it's not hard for someone like *me* at least," Schlatt says haughtily.

"...the fuck are you talking about? *Dig myself*— How the hell would *you* know?" Tommy stares at him, eyes narrowed.

Schlatt shrugs. "Before politics, I was a man of many ventures. I've got stories that would put some hair on your fucking chest. Not that I'm gonna share 'em. Still, I'll give you some advice," Schlatt leans back, settling in, enjoying having an audience who feels compelled to listen.

“Okay. Okay, fine. What’ve you got?” Tommy doesn’t have much hope, but at this point he’ll take anything besides the hysteria and hopelessness he knows waits for him when Dream brings him back.

“Alright, first you’re– I’m guessing you’re in a coffin?”

“In a– a–”

“In a *coffin*? Comprendo? Do you need me to spell it out for you?”

“Yeah, yes. I’m in a box, I’m in a box–”

“Right. Is it like, oak? What type are we talking? Spruce? What is it?”

“I don’t–” Tommy stares at him blankly. “*Type* of wood–? Got no fuckin’ idea–”

“Alright, well you better hope it’s fuckin’ spruce or some shit, you need *weak wood*, and even then I doubt your scrawny pathetic little limbs have a shot anyway. But still, ‘cause I’m a *nice guy*– and I mean ‘cause I’m bored out of my skull– here’s what you’re gonna do.”

~

Schlatt’s meandering and belittling instruction remains like an obnoxious bastard of a lighthouse, however blurry it is now. Tommy returns to the dark, but this time he does not try to scream for help. He’s still shaky and his mouth is still dry, resurrection not a cure for dehydration, merely a step beyond his deathbed. He goes to reach forward, to touch the wood inches above his face, but he struggles to even raise his arms enough to push in front of him. His elbows hit the sides harshly, splinters aren’t very high on his list of priorities, especially with what he intends to– *has* to do next. He has about four inches of room to get enough momentum to break through wooden slats, but it’s not like he has anything better to do with his time nor any reason to try to preserve his half dead body from injury.

~

“You’re gonna use your knees, got it? Not your fuckin’ arms, your *knees*. They’ll do more damage than those pathetic little chicken wings you’ve got, god, what’d you bench, thirty?”

“I don’t– I don’t *bench* anything–”

“Of course you don’t,” he scoffs.

“–d’you have any fucking clue where I am–”

“Yeah yeah, hey shut up, d’you want my fuckin’ help or not? Jesus, tryna do you a favor, quit blabbing then, no one *cares*. ”

Tommy scowls. “No wonder Quackity fuckin’ left you...”

“D’you want my help or not?”

The word tasting sour on his tongue, he concedes. “Yes,” he replies irritably.

“So, you’re gonna try and push your knees up until you crack through the wood, if you can’t do that, that’s it, alright? You’re just fucked.”

~

Tommy is desperate for help, but Schlatt’s nagging instructions, vaguer in his memory upon resurrection, it’s annoying as much as he clings to it. Tommy tries to bend his leg. His knee hits the wood almost immediately. He tries to keep pushing, pressing until it hurts. More dirt crumbles through the cracks and maybe he should take that as a good sign. Mostly he’s just shutting his eyes, trying to prevent dirt from getting in his eyes. It’s not pitch black down here. The farm room he knows is only a few feet above him has glowstone lamps shining perpetually, and that stupid fucking pipe allowing him air, forcing him to prolong his suffering, it’s enough that he can see the shapes of his limbs struggling, he can see the wood. There’s no fucking way Dream nailed it down thoroughly. Tommy can break it.

He has to.

~

“There’s— There’s no room, I dunno how I’m supposed to—”

“Figure it out. The fuck d’you want from me? Jesus, just— You scared to bust up your kneecaps? You’re in a fucking *grave*, what’re you trying to preserve?” Schlatt sneers. He takes another swig. The bottle of some ambiguous and everlasting booze has never left his hand, kept in a paper bag like all good functioning alcoholics. “Just, hit it as hard as you can. Try and crack the fucking thing, I dunno.”

~

Tommy knows this will hurt. He can do this. Tommy lies flat again. He can just lift his head enough to ensure his knee is lined up with the gaps between the wood. He just needs to crack it. He can break the rest, claw his way through, he just needs to get started.

Tommy maybe should have some instinct remaining telling him not to go full throttle into a task that *will* break a bone, but that surely died with him at some point.

So he shatters the wooden board and his kneecap with it. Tommy screams. He knows it won’t be questioned. He can throw as much of a fit as he wants, beg for help from the surface, babble nonsense. No one is coming to check on him.

~

“I d-dunno if I can do this, I dunno how I’m gonna dig out, and even if I do isn’t he gonna notice? The— The dirt moving and shit?”

“That’s not my fucking problem, is it? I dunno, do you wanna be subtle or do you want to get out of there?”

“I want– I want out, I want to get out.”

“That’s what I fucking thought. Besides, not like you’re taking up any less space. And, in what fucking world would Dream think *you* would be able to dig your way out?” Schlatt scoffs. “If I’m being honest, I don’t think you’re actually gonna be able to, but hey, give it a shot. Tell me how far you got after you choke on dirt.”

~

Tommy clutches his broken knee, gasping, mouth too dry for sobs even as his chest aches. He did it, though. And next time he dies– he’s fucking *praying* to suffocate, not a second round of the slow hours it will take for his already dehydrated body to shut down– he’ll return with his knee hopefully at least somewhat healed.

It’s not over yet. It’s barely even started. Tommy can make out shards of wood, cracked open, dirt had crumbled in for a moment, but without much incentive and most of the wood intact, it soon stopped. Tommy just needed an opening. The slats were just too close together for him to jam his fingers through, but this he can manage. Tommy’s right knee is broken. He’s definitely not at a good angle to start digging with his hand, so he pushes his left knee up through the wood, clenching his jaw tight enough an ache rings through his skull as he feels the loose shards of wood reluctant to yield and digging in, getting caught in his trousers, deep enough to draw blood, but he keeps trying.

~

“If I break through the wood, doesn’t that mean all the dirt is gonna crush me? How the fuck– I dunno how I–”

“You gonna let me finish or are you just gonna keep complaining?”

“Fuck, fine. Go. How do I–” Tommy grumbles. He folds his arms over his chest, gloomy. “What now?”

“Once you can get through, when you get it open enough and all the dirt starts pouring in and shit, you gotta be quick about it, alright? You gotta shove it all down to your legs. Keep moving it until you can sit up. And try to pull your legs under you once you’ve got enough head room. Feel like this shit is pretty obvious,” Schlatt says lazily, taking another drink. Tommy almost wants to ask what Schlatt’s choice of booze for the rest of time is. He can’t be bothered. “Comprendo?”

“Yeah, *comprendo*.”

~

Tommy manages to get his left knee raised, breaking through more. He tries to sink lower with what little room he has so he can reach it with his hands. Tommy’s hands tremble, he’s so fucking weak and he *knows* his hands are about to get shredded by the split wood, but he’s far less terrified of that pain than he is of the dirt now crumbling further to fill in the gap he has just made.

~

“You gotta work *fast*. Don’t panic, keep your shit together, and get shoveling. If you panic and miss your window– great, you’ve buried yourself *again*. You don’t want that, do you? So, keep *calm*, and maybe you’ll make it.”

“Yeah. Yeah, I’ll try not to panic. Keep calm. Easy...”

~

Tommy thinks if he breathes he’ll start hyperventilating. He’ll *definitely* start choking on dirt, so he shuts his eyes, he shuts his mouth, and he does not inhale through his nose. Blindly, he claws at the earth, funneling it away from his torso and down toward his feet, kicking it for good measure, packing it down, his right knee protesting with a piercing pain, his hands are cold and numb and Tommy feels like he’s shoving his hands through a pit of needles, splinters catching, cutting into his arms now, but he’s fine with that, if his arms are getting shredded too that means he’s reaching further. Tommy keeps clawing blindly, the earth spreading, and he does not want to open his eyes but he’s terrified he’s doing this wrong and soon he’ll drown in it. Tommy wants to sit up so badly. He wants to fucking move. His lungs begin to burn.

~

“You gotta keep breaking the wood, alright? It’s not a one-stop shop, you gotta be strong enough to rip it open enough to fit through. Good news is, you’re the size of a fucking string bean, so it doesn’t have to be big, bad news is, you’re the size of a fucking string bean and I doubt you’re gonna be able to bulk up enough to tear open the boards, but give it a shot. Fuck it, why not.”

~

Tommy stops grabbing at the dirt, he tucks his knees up, feverishly delighted to find that he *can* lift his knees, they take up enough space that the earth is slower in burying him, and he grabs onto the edge of the wood. He starts with the slat on his left side, scared of what the motion will do to his knee on his right. He grabs onto the edge of the gap with both hands. His palms burn, stabbing pain, the sting of a few cuts more across his skin, but he holds on tighter. Tommy takes a pause, he freezes until the earth is no longer disturbed and settles. He takes a few desperate gulps of air and he still does not open his eyes. He holds his breath once more, he tears. The terrible groaning crack of the wood tearing, splintering around the nails, Tommy flinches as he feels a shard brush against his cheek alongside the further disturbed earth and he keeps pulling until it gives and his momentum sends his arms across the two feet width of the coffin until the opposite side splinters him as well.

Tommy has no time for triumph. The earth seeks the newly opened space, as unrelenting a tide as water. Tommy shoves the slat down beside him and begins clawing, like he’s doggy-paddling through the soil. The earth clings to the blood smearing his hands. He’s tried to keep the earth shoved down toward his feet, but some of it has still begun to swallow him, he knows it’s probably going to pile near his head, eventually it will cover the pipe, and he’ll get his wish and suffocate.

You can't die yet. You gotta keep digging, if you die now, it's gonna cover you until you can't fucking move anymore.

~

“And once you can sit up, you basically just keep doing that. Get your legs under you when you can move enough, keep pushing until you see air, right? Easy,” Schlatt takes another swig, burping obnoxiously. He does not inspire confidence.

Tommy doesn't know what to make of it. At this point he will take anything to fight for over the alternative, but this isn't exactly an ideal source. “What the fuck are you even drinking? Beer? Whiskey? Can you even get drunk anymore? You're dead as shit.”

Schlatt squints at the bottle. “Protein shake. I think. There's some vodka in there too, gotta be.”

“That sounds fucking disgusting.”

“Yeah, it's not *for* you, who the fuck are *you* to judge?” Schlatt snarls. “You're fucking welcome, by the way. Jesus, your stupid pretentious brother never taught you any manners?”

“Probably, but why the fuck would I use 'em on a stupid fuck like *you*,” Tommy snaps.

“Yeah, right,” Schlatt sneers, squinting at Tommy, before chucking the glass bottle at his head.

It shatters against the wall, Tommy disappearing.

“Good riddance,” Schlatt huffs, picking up the glass bottle beside him. There's always one in reach.

MD eventually graces Schlatt's gym again. There isn't much for the two of them to talk about, Schlatt weary of MD's romantic exploits and MD bored by Schlatt's apparently impressive reps. That leaves only Tommy, the most interesting thing to happen to Schlatt in ages.

“Yeah, so, I told him how to dig out, and considering the stupid brat hasn't come back yet, it probably worked,” Schlatt says haughtily.

“*Shit*, you've had to dig yourself out of a *grave*?” MD can't help but sound a bit impressed.

“What? No! No, obviously fucking not, what gave you that idea?” Schlatt scoffs.

“You just *said* man, you said you—”

“No, no I lied, and then I fuckin' improvised. I have no clue if it could actually work, especially for that scrawny rat,” Schlatt shrugs.

“Ey, my man Tomas can do tons of crazy shit, you don't even *know*. ”

“Yeah ‘cause of *my* advice.”

“Nah nah, you just said you were *lying*.”

“Still, it’s *my* advice!”

“Whatever, you’re full of shit.”

~

Tommy doesn’t know if the air is actually getting thinner or if his panic is making him dizzy. He’s on his knees now, well, *one* knee, desperately clawing above him, trying to stand up further even with the earth trying to bury his shoulders. It’s getting harder to move his arms. He *has* to be able to keep pushing the earth, even if it feels like he’s running out of room to shove it underneath him. His eyes are still closed tightly, he’s barely breathing as he’s somehow managed to bottleneck himself in his own grave, the coffin still has room for more earth, but the tunnel he’s dug is too tight so instead half the earth is falling into his face. It doesn’t matter, his arms are burning, the cuts sharp and painful as he *still* keeps pushing.

Until he feels air.

Tommy gasps, immediately choking on earth. Okay, the tips of his fingers are above ground, but to get to that point he’s buried the rest of himself, and if he weren’t running out of air before, he definitely is now.

Tommy resists the impulse to scream for help.

You get yourself out, you find somewhere to hide. You... you try to get yourself a weapon, yeah? Something. Anything.

Water. You definitely need water.

He has to get out first.

“*Please...*” Tommy says weakly, unable to hear himself properly through the earth, but he keeps clawing for air, shoulders hunched inward as he forces himself up through the loosened soil until *finally*, he is blinded by light, spitting up earth and taking desperate gulps of air, the scent of plants and the stone walls and water almost enough to make him cry. It’s warmer up here in the light too. Tommy’s vision is blurry, still half blinded by light as he tries to pull himself up with frail, trembling arms, unable to put any weight on his shattered kneecap, already moving at all sends spikes of white hot pain up his leg. Tommy takes a moment to just breathe, ragged and choked with dry sobs. He squints until the light isn’t so blinding, vaguely aware at any moment Dream could come around the corner.

He could bury you again.

Tommy is too dehydrated for proper tears, letting out a fragile whimper, it feels like the inside of his mouth is covered in a layer of clay, his eyes sting, his lashes heavy.

Tommy pulls himself out just a little further, about to free his legs, knowing he'll likely have to use his hands to lift the deadweight of his destroyed kneecap, but then he sees it. Out of the corner of his eye, at first he thinks it's fabric, varying squares of color each no bigger than his hand, hanging from a thread strung across the ceiling, one tinged a mottled green, another black with a strip of white on its edge, another tan and almost glossy, like a pelt, and one a far paler white-ish pink with edges marred by red, almost like skin—

Tommy stares at them, his breathing growing more rapid, more frantic. Tommy hears a soft whine like a wounded animal, he vaguely registers it's from his own breathing before he blacks out.

Chapter End Notes

Whoa whoa whoa everyone stay calm. Stay chill. Hold onto your hats.

Take a deep breath.

Yeah. I got nothing, actually.

Did you know there's a wikihow for what to do if you're buried alive? Wild.

Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

CW: gore, gaslighting ? idk straight up lying, violence, abuse, dehydration, injuries, maybe dehumanization? I think that's it. Idk. Implied animal death maybe. You know how it is. This one is not More fucked up per-say, but Unusually fucked up.

Okay, anyway good luck <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Hey, Punz, I have a job for you,” Dream says. Punz hadn’t complained, not when Tommy had begun screaming and pleading like he was in agony from underground, not when they had dragged Wilbur’s corpse back into his cell, and revived him as well. They can still hear Wilbur screaming, tugging against the chain around his wrist.

“Do you, now?” Punz says icily.

“Yeah,” Dream shrugs, leaning against the wall. “I’m going to be totally transparent with you. That’s what you want, right?”

“Just tell me what you’re talking about.”

“See, I made Tommy a promise,” Dream says. “He’s counting on me, y’know? Bless his heart,” Dream says patronizingly. “So, I was wondering if you could help me with that?”

“What? Just *tell* me what the fuck you’re talking about,” Punz snaps.

“Tommy and I made a list together. Of people I’m going to hurt. Okay, you know what, me saying I was gonna keep my promise– That’s the wrong phrasing, I think. I’m going to make *Tommy* think I’m keeping my promise, same difference to him, really, but you and I know going back to the Mainlands, well, that’s not a smart choice to make. And in theory I could continue with just lying, just *tell* him I did, just like I did with L’Manberg, but eventually, he’s gonna start doubting me. But all it takes is a little... a little *theatrics*. So, I have a bit of a challenge for you.”

“You still haven’t gotten to the point.”

“D’you think you can skin a creeper?”

Punz stares at him, wide-eyed, irritated. “Is that supposed to be a fucking metaphor? What’re you talking about?”

“Okay, so, my little, I guess *hit list*, it’s Sam, Ranboo, Ant, Jack, Niki, and Eret. Easy, right?”

“No, no that doesn’t explain *anything*. ”

“I gave you *one* thing to get, the more challenging one, to be fair, but I’m taking care of the rest, Punz. Just get some of a creeper’s skin intact. That’s Sam handled. I’m going to get the rest. I’m gonna...” he laughs, “how many ways to skin a cat, right? I’m gonna find a tan and brownish type cat, you know, something Antfrost-ish, and then an Enderman. The Enderman, I think it might make him suspicious, y’know? He’s a paranoid little bastard. So, I have an idea, to bleach the some of it white. Dunno if it’ll work, but no harm in trying.”

Punz is, regrettably, following along. “And what about the rest of them? Where are you gonna find a replacement for Eret, Niki, and Jack, huh?”

Dream must be smirking behind his mask. He turns back toward the cell door, where Wilbur continues to scream in earnest, hurling abuse and useless threats on behalf of his brother. “Well, it’s not like we’re gonna do any permanent damage. We can even be polite about it, do it while he’s dead.”

Punz, struggling to fathom a reasonable reply to this new absurdity, goes with something else that had been itching at the back of his mind. “You made Wilbur hit Tommy.”

“What?” Dream laughs.

“Are you going to act like you didn’t?”

"I don't see how this is relevant to anything, but sure." Dream scoffs, “and I mean, I wouldn’t say I *made* him, I gave him a *choice*.”

“Did you now? It was either he hit Tommy or you’d...” Punz glances in the direction of the farm. “Right. That’s a *choice*.”

“I mean, it *is*, ” Dream shrugs, walking past him and toward his library.

“Why would you do that?”

Dream stops, turning back toward him, arms folded, head tilted in a way that clearly reads exasperated. “Do I really need to spell it out for you? You don’t think Tommy hating Wilbur isn’t *useful* to us?”

“Honestly, no. I assumed you’d want to... to hurt one of them to hurt the other, and this doesn’t exactly help with that,” Punz doesn’t know what sort of justification he’s looking for.

“You and all your *moral complaints*, acting like... like there’s some magical *line* you’ve managed not to cross,” Dream scoffs. “So, we can’t make them hate each other, we *can* hurt them to hurt each other? Am I following that right?”

Punz says nothing.

Dream steps closer, taunting as always. “You acting all high and mighty because I told Wilbur to hurt Tommy– are we really doing this again? I’m gonna have to go through another list of all the fucked up stuff *you*’ve done, but when *I* do something you personally

don't like, that's when it crosses a line? I'm surprised you didn't throw a fit about me saying I'm gonna skin a cat. So, animal cruelty doesn't cross the line, huh? Whatever that line is?"

Punz is distracted from past horror by present horror. "You're serious. About the—" Punz resists a shudder, disgusted. "The... skin... thing you're planning on doing."

"Obviously."

"*Just* to scare Tommy? There's no other reason for this. It's a—"

"—waste of time? You say that, Punz," Dream sighs, satisfied and smug. "And every time, you do it anyway, and in the end, we still make progress. *Little* progress, but still, at least we stay in control, right?"

Punz is too irritable to bother protesting the many flaws in his logic. "And if I don't help you?"

Dream sighs. "You're always so *pouty*. If you don't, it takes me longer to do, which means it takes Tommy longer to get dug up, and takes even longer for him to memorize the revive book. Do you follow?"

Punz glares at him, but what protest does he have to offer? As per usual, his squeamish morality falls on deaf ears. If he could turn off that feeling, that discomfort, he would. Some things he can't resist making a comment on, however futile. He doesn't know to what end, so he pushes on, still exasperated. "Okay, how the fuck do you expect me to *skin* a creeper?"

"Obviously, you can't let it explode. So, you shoot it, and you cut off some of its skin before it despawns to gunpowder," Dream says it like it's easy.

"That's... that's *seconds*, that's... that's *nothing*," Punz snaps.

"Okay, so don't shoot it. Get it with a sword so you're there and ready. I mean, I wouldn't use a flaming sword, but shouldn't be too hard, right?" Dream shrugs. "Unless you wanna trade? Look, getting the Enderman will be just as hard, honestly. Maybe harder. I'm doing that, *and* all the others. Do you want to do that? The Enderman, catch me a cat, and then take a few chunks out of Wilbur? Does that sound easier to you?"

"None of this is *easy*," Punz hisses.

"What can I say, Punz. High rewards have a high cost. Did you think immortality would come *cheap*? What's the past year of work in our future eternity, huh?" Dream claps him on the shoulder.

"I'll do it, fine," Punz glowers. "Get a move on on your end. This shouldn't take longer than it fucking has to."

"That's the spirit!"

Punz heads for the surface, irritable and disturbed. He had to admit, despite the dangers, he'd much rather try to skin a creeper than the laundry list of horror the alternative offers. Punz

does not sail to the jungle, but rather past it to the neighboring savanna. He makes camp in a tree, waiting for one to spawn.

The first one, expectedly, blows up in his face. The second does not, but he fumbles to bring his blade to the corpse a second too late, left holding fistfuls of gunpowder.

The third, the same. The fourth, the fifth.

It is the following day, his struggles continue, largely not from the creeper having time to explode, but Punz never having enough time to wrangle the body. Another day passes. Punz is tired, it's boiling hot in the savanna, not that he plans on risking taking off his armor any time soon, and it is both boring and dangerous work. It is the *tenth* creeper to wander toward him, hissing as per usual, that he managed to cut down, hastily slicing along its side, grabbing onto the flesh slick with something like blood, holding it in his fist apart from the rest of the body. It stays while the rest despawns. Punz stares at it, nose crinkled in disgust, holding it away from him. It's oily. Which, he supposes for an explosive creature might make sense. He could skin it properly now that this piece isn't going anywhere, but he isn't exactly enthused by the thought. He reluctantly shoves it in his inventory.

Punz returns underground to the scent of bleach. He sighs, knowing what he's returning to. He turns the corner into Dream's library, where the man stands over a cauldron, dipping a jet-black hide just barely under the surface. Punz dully scans the room, wincing at the sight of beige fur strung up.

"Dream," Punz says stiffly.

"Oh, hey," Dream doesn't even give him the satisfaction of being startled from Punz sneaking up on him. "What do you think?" Dream holds up the scrap of Enderman, the edge now faded to a sickly white.

"It looks off to me. It's not pale enough," Punz says dully. "Here," he tosses his own catch onto the workbench. "Took me two fucking days and like, a dozen creepers to get."

"But you did it! Good job," Dream says, irritating as even his praise feels belittling. "And yeah, it's a little more gray than I'd like, but I think it'll hold up just fine."

"Mhm," Punz's lip curls in disgust, unable to ward off nausea at their current collection.

"Right, I've gotten something out of Wilbur once, but two more to go," Dream leaves his current project, taking Punz's catch and cleanly separating the skin from the flesh with a disturbing amount of ease.

"You mean you've—" Punz looks around the room. "You've already done it once?!"

"Yeah, don't worry, he was dead when I did it, so he won't remember it happening and snitch to Tommy or anything," Dream shrugs. "It's not *here*," Dream laughs at him staring around. "It's already hung up in the room. I was gonna go put up our faux-Antfrost and faux-Ranboo before going back to Wilbur, and you can hang up faux-Sam!"

Punz sighs, jittery and irritable. “And... how much longer? Until Tommy is back to memorizing the book?”

Dream shrugs, taking the pelt and bleached skin as well as Punz’s haul and returning to the corridor. “However long it takes to complete our collection, then I’ll dig him up.”

“What’s left?” Punz asks.

“Not much, actually! It’s just two more times uh,” Dream laughs, “*harvesting* from Wilbur. I could’ve done it all in one go, but I thought that might be a bit more noticeable.”

Punz follows him to the farm, stopping short as out of the corner of his eye he sees a pale, bloody scrap hung out as if on a clothesline. He doesn’t look at it directly, but staring at the soft earth of a grave isn’t exactly calming, especially as in the brief silence he thinks he can hear faintly Tommy babbling and pleading, not even knowing if he has an audience.

“Do you want the honors?” Dream offers the slick green scrap to him, voice lowered, as if somehow Tommy could be listening through his delirium.

“Do I—?” Punz steps back as if it might bite him. “*No*, what the fuck— No, I don’t.”

Dream shrugs. “Fine, not like it makes a difference to me,” he assesses the green skin. “Huh. It’s interesting, at least. It might not hold up under closer inspection, it’s got like... a bit of fur on it.”

“No, that tracks. Sam is sort of... sort of fuzzy, y’know” Punz says, still refusing to look at the rest of the wall.

“Is he?”

“Yeah. Not so much on his face, but yeah.”

“Interesting...” Dream murmurs, hand brushing over it carefully.

“I dunno why I thought you’d know that.”

“What?” Dream looks up at him.

Punz doesn’t want to look at Dream either, he’s more focused on the pipe sticking out of the ground, wondering if there’s any chance Tommy can hear them. They’re probably speaking too quietly, because, Punz realizes, he’d matched Dream’s tone. He’d spoken softly because Dream had. His irritated awareness doesn’t stop him from continuing.

“You knew Sam pretty well at one point, I thought.”

“Oh, yeah,” Dream shrugs, hanging up the skin beside the rest. “We were real *buddies*,” he says dryly. “Even built a prison for me, in fact. Until he stabbed me in the back.”

“Hm.”

Dream laughs, something a bit more dangerous there now. “What *aren't* you saying, Punz?”

“Just... I thought you knew him a lot longer than that.”

“I did,” Dream says mildly, brushing past him, continuing with his grotesque chores. “Does it matter?”

Punz follows him toward Wilbur’s cell. “No, no I guess not.” Punz stops sharply further back as Dream reaches the door.

“Come on, don’t look so nervous,” Dream teases him. “He won’t feel a thing. Maybe a... a pinch, when I put a crossbow bolt through his skull.”

“Right. And after this, all of this... whatever this is, is done, Tommy learns the revive book, and we keep moving?”

Dream sighs exasperatedly. “Yes, *dear*, of course. You’re nagging me like we’re fucking married, god...”

“Yeah, not likely,” Punz says.

He doesn’t move as Dream opens the cell door. Wilbur sits on the floor, staring in bleary confusion at a pool of his own blood, one hand reaching over his shoulder to dab at blood on his back. He looks up, startled, struggling to stand as the door opens.

“Hey! Hey you stay the *fuck* away from me, you hear me?! W-What the fuck did you d—”

The sharp *clunk* of the crossbow being fired, and Wilbur hits the ground again. Out of the corner of his eye, Punz sees Dream roll Wilbur over and get out a knife like he’s just a piece of game. As always, Punz walks away.

~

Tommy wakes, dazed, to someone lightly slapping his cheek. He’s lying on his back, and his knee is still in agony, as well as his shredded arms, and honestly the rest of him. He struggles to open his eyes, still heavy, lashes caked with dirt. A white mask swims into view.

“Hey, Tommy, you with me again?” Dream says.

Tommy jolts awake like he’s been shocked, scrambling to put some distance between himself and Dream, struggling with one leg half broken and the other still stiff and wrong like always. “N-No, you— I— No—” Tommy stammers hoarsely, coughing weakly.

Dream laughs, sitting at the edge of his now messy grave, earth disrupted and crumbling from Tommy’s desperate self-exhumation, “I haven’t even *said* anything yet. Or is that *no*, you’re not with me? I’m pretty sure you are. You’re conscious and everything.”

“Please d—” Tommy devolves into coughs, struggling to catch his breath.

“What? Get ahold of yourself, come on,” Dream says scoldingly. “I’ll give you water. Drink it before you start talking again, alright?”

Tommy stares at the bottle Dream is offering like it’s poison. He keeps his distance. Dream sighs and reaches toward him, Tommy struggling to move further back, but Dream grabs his ankle and drags him back across the floor. Tommy screams, vision spotted with white as agony shoots through his shattered knee. Despite that, he’s still clawing at the floor, kicking with his left leg, trying to stop Dream from dragging him back.

That is, until his vision clears, and he spots what he had been cowering under.

Scraps of flesh, each no bigger than a book page, strung up in a line. Tommy stops trying to crawl away, as he had been clawing *toward* the horror show, and instead sits up, collapsing backwards as he cannot put weight on his leg, shuddering back, dry-heaving, until he bumps into Dream and tries to flinch away from that. He cries out weakly when Dream grabs his shoulder to stop his efforts, eyes shut tightly. He doesn’t want to see them.

“*Tommy*, I’m not gonna punish you,” Dream laughs, like he’s being ridiculous or childish.

Tommy still doesn’t open his eyes. He just shakes his head, his breathing still sharp, a whine escaping from his tightly shut mouth, and if he weren’t so dehydrated tears would’ve been sure to follow.

“You know, if you don’t drink something, you’re gonna pass out,” Dream’s grip on his shoulder tightens, he leans closer. “And *maybe*, next time you wake up, you’ll be back underground. So *fucking cooperate*,” he hisses.

“*Please*—” Tommy is cut off by a sharp stinging pain in his cheek, almost thrown back to the floor if it weren’t for Dream’s harsh hold keeping him upright.

“Stop fucking begging and do as I say. You’re wasting your breath. The only way you stay out of that hole is by *obeying*. So, drink it,” Dream shoves the glass bottle at him again.

Tommy takes it with trembling hands, forced to open his eyes, but he only looks down, at his own filthy and bloody legs splayed out in front of him, unable to settle in a way that doesn’t aid the agony in his knee. He’s covered in dirt, smearing the bottle with damp earth, but he drinks. He initially wants to rinse his mouth out with the first mouthful, to clear away the earth coating it, but with Dream watching so irritably he can only bring himself to do exactly as the man asked. Tommy lowers the empty bottle, staring at Dream, unsure of what he’s waiting for besides praying Dream doesn’t hand him a shovel and tell him to start digging.

“You look like a scared, muddy, little dog,” Dream laughs.

Tommy says nothing. He knows what he will see if he looks behind him. He feels as if he should’ve gone mad by now. He doesn’t know if he’ll be able to recognize madness when it does happen, so maybe it has. He thinks madness should be more troublesome for Dream than him just sitting here, silent and horrified. He knows there is no true escape, especially not from dying, but he still wishes he could just stop, to *end* properly.

He's tired.

"You know, I'll give credit where it's due, Tommy," Dream puts a hand over his heart, condescending and taunting. "You really have me impressed. I mean, first I almost was gonna tear into Punz for going behind my back, but I don't think he could've snuck around me, and, well," he gestures to Tommy. "You *do* look like you just dug yourself out of a grave!"

Tommy still says nothing. The only vague thought he can comprehend for himself as he does everything in his power not to think about what hangs behind him is that he wants Wilbur to hug him. And some more water would be nice. None of these thoughts offer comfort.

"And, I mean, the last time I was impressed with you for disobeying me I locked you in a cell for a week. Do you remember that? Feels like *ages* ago," Dream is taking his time, but Tommy listens. He does not start pleading again. After seeing... what Dream had done, he has half a mind to crawl back into that grave himself. "But I'm not gonna do that. That doesn't feel fair, y'know? You didn't try to escape, and I never said you weren't *allowed* to dig yourself out," Dream laughs, having a fantastic time. "Oversight on *my* part, I guess," he says like they share an inside joke. He still hasn't let go of Tommy's shoulder. Tommy almost feels like his touch burns. He wants him to let go, but he doesn't try to pull away. "So, you're not going back in there. To be clear, I'm not planning on healing you either, you didn't *earn* that, so, you can just, deal with your fucked up leg and the..." Dream grabs his wrist, turning his arm around to assess the damage, the bloodied scrapes, the visible scraps of wood stuck under his skin, his tattered fingernails. "...the rest of it. You did that, it's your problem. I'm already being way kinder than you deserve." Dream says it like he expects Tommy to argue. Tommy doesn't. "So, other than that, business as usual, right? I'm gonna get you another copy of the revivebook, some blank books, and you can get back to work. Maybe I'll bring you some food in a bit, I'm guessing you're even more starved than usual by now, huh?" Again, no reply from Tommy.

Dream stands, Tommy reacts only by shivering, almost twitching, once Dream lets go of him and he's able to move freely. Tommy is still wired like a spring, his movements jerky, like he's trying to shake off the feeling of Dream's hand on him.

"But first," Dream hums, walking past Tommy to the thing Tommy is resolutely not thinking about. "I will say, you're lucky I work fast. Although, not as fast as *you* dig, apparently," Dream chuckles. "And, as an added bonus, a little *reward* just for surprising me, not sure if you've noticed, but one more person needs to be added to my little... *collage*. I mean, I got Sam, Ranboo, Ant," Dream pauses. Tommy cannot fathom the possibility that Dream is currently considering Eret, Jack, and Niki and figuring out who Tommy values the least, whose safety he would be the most disappointed by. "Eret, and now Niki. But again, because you surprised me, I won't go after Jack. Isn't that nice of me?" Dream turns back toward him.

Tommy is still facing away, his unbroken knee tucked into his chest, his head down, shoulders hunched inward and eyes shut tightly as he tries to not hear what Dream is saying.

"Tommy? *Hello?*" Dream says liltingly, sauntering back over, tapping Tommy on the shoulder.

Tommy flinches violently, filthy hands covering his head, dampening his hair with his own blood.

“Are you listening to me?” Dream has the audacity to sound whiny. He kicks some of the loose chunks of soil. “Y’know, I feel like you *should* be listening to me, Tommy. I know it...” Dream looks thoughtfully over his shoulder, back at his work. “I know it *looks* scary, but don’t you want me to explain so you know just how bad?” Dream’s grin is hidden behind his mask as he turns back to his unearthed captive. “Most of them didn’t even die!”

“So tell me. If you’re gonna tell me just do it,” Tommy’s voice is ragged, barely audible, but it’s still a response. It’s still what Dream wants.

Dream pushes Tommy slightly, as if testing to see if he’ll fall over. “Look up.” He pushes again when Tommy doesn’t obey, poking Tommy harshly just above his ear until Tommy has to reach out to catch himself, but he doesn’t try to swat Dream away. Dream is ever so amused, playing with him like a child who had buried a doll in the garden over the winter, and having found it in the spring decided to twist all its joints to measure just how broken it had become. “Just, look up at me so we can have a conversation like rational people, alright?”

“I don’t... I don’t want to...” Tommy mumbles weakly. “P-Please don’t make me look at it...”

“Look at *what*, Tommy?” Dream crouches down in front of him. “Look at *them*?” He points to the back wall. “You *chose* them. You really don’t want to see what you chose?” That terrible switch from malice to childishness, to a cruel, almost gentle patronization, talking to him like a child who is too young to know what he wants. “Are you *sure*?”

Dream has figured out how much damage he can do just by talking. Not merely the matter of words, but the longer he talks, the more it’s drawn out, whatever *it* is, Tommy doesn’t know, only that he’s forever waiting for things to get worse, even as he cannot imagine how it *can get worse*; nonetheless, the longer Dream talks, the closer Tommy gets to grabbing a stalk of dried wheat and stabbing it into his ears until he can’t hear it anymore. Tommy doesn’t reply. He’s rocking slightly, before he quickly stops as even that tiny motion sends sharper pain through the constant violent ache of his broken bone. If he cannot move, he has to do something.

“Whatever you’re gonna say just *say it*, ” Tommy says hollowly. He almost says *I can’t take it anymore*, but even in this delirium, he doesn’t dare risk the satisfaction that would give Dream nor the incentive for him to push further.

“Fine,” Dream sighs, sitting back down across from him, legs crossed, looking contemplative. Dream pauses, thinking it over for a moment, spinning his tales. “I said most of them didn’t even die, which is true. Just Sam and—” A pause. “Sam and Niki. D’you wanna know *why* they died?”

“N-No...”

“Because they didn’t try to run away. See, the ones that ran, that was *easy*. Especially when they’re expecting me to try to kill them, but I’m *not*. I’m not trying to kill them! So, their backs are already to me, so all it takes is a crossbow bolt to the leg— had to do that to get Ranboo and Ant down, they’re *fast* when they want to be, and because they’re running away, they fall forward on their faces! Eret I think I snuck up on, I didn’t need to shoot him. And at that point, it’s kind of easy, you know? Keep them pinned down, just for like, a *minute*, really, just long enough for me to...” Dream mimics a long slicing motion, “and then, I send a message to Punz, and he stasised me out before anyone was the wiser!” Dream looks up at his captive audience. “Tommy, *hey*,” he says scoldingly, grabbing onto Tommy’s wrists and pulling them away from his ears. “I’m not making you look at the skins, the least you can do is be a good listener, alright? Are you gonna listen now?” Tommy doesn’t resist or reply, but when Dream lets go, he doesn’t cover his ears. He’s started rocking forward and back again. He doesn’t care about the pain.

“Good,” Dream continues. “So, that’s Ant, Ranboo, and Eret. I mean, I guess Eret didn’t really have the chance to run, because he never saw me coming, either way. Again, Niki and Sam weren’t that easy. See, they didn’t turn around to run. So I had to kill them. With Sam—” he chuckles. “It was *cute*, really. You know how he basically has him and Ponk handcuffed together *all* the time? He’s still being all *clingy*. It seems like the rest of the server— well, they haven’t moved on, but I dunno, they’re not traveling in *packs* as much, although, that’s probably changed now! Anyway, so, they’re not literally handcuffed together of course, although I wouldn’t put it past Sam, honestly, but he sees me— or, actually I think *Ponk* saw me first, looking all wide-eyed, pointing at me, but then Sam told him to run, got out his sword, and Ponk *didn’t* run, so Sam pushed him, and Ponk did, and Sam stayed. Really *stood his ground!*” Dream sounds so mocking.

He presses on, cheerful and conversational. “See, he didn’t run, not because he was *brave*, or thought he could fight me, Sam is a coward deep down, but because he assumed I was gonna hurt Ponk again. But *you* prevented that, Tommy!” Dream punches his arm lightly. Tommy still flinches. “Isn’t that great? You went against Sam’s expectations, which honestly made him easier to kill, because at that point he wasn’t guarding his *own* life, just making sure I didn’t get past him to Ponk! It *did* make harvesting a bit more annoying, though, because I had to be really fast about it before he despawned. See? It’s not like he’s on his last life! He’s fine! Why do you look like you’re about to puke? He’s *fine*.”

Tommy doesn’t say anything. His nails try to dig into his palms, but there’s too much dirt underneath them to draw blood, instead the dirt is pressed in deeper, already damaged nails pushed further back from their beds, and that bleeds just as well.

“Okay, that leaves Niki, because as I said, Jack Manifold, lucky guy, is off the menu for now. So, Niki *is* brave, as we both know. Of course she stood her ground. Actually,” Dream laughs, devolving almost into hysterics. Tommy finally looks up at him, waiting with baffled horror for whatever could give Dream such joy. “Holy *shit*. I can’t believe I didn’t think of it until now! She didn’t *run* because she’s not used to her fucking peg-leg yet! Ha! She didn’t have a choice. Oh, that’s good,” Dream sighs, smug at his own storytelling abilities. He thinks he’s improvising *fantastically* well. “She’s an *okay* fighter, Niki is. But honestly, it wasn’t a long fight—”

“What’s going on?” Punz speaks up from the doorway, staring at Tommy like he’s a ghost risen from the dead. Or rather, *not* like a ghost risen from the dead. That would’ve denoted some familiarity.

“Oh, hey Punz!” Dream waves. “You’ll never *guess* what our little Tommy did,” Dream stands, ruffling Tommy’s hair, sending dirt and dust raining around him. “The little brat *dug himself out*.”

“He...” Punz stares at the grave.

“Yeah!” Dream gestures behind him to the grave, delighted. “And because I’m so generous, I’m not gonna punish him for it, because it’s, I’ll admit it, a little impressive.”

“Right, a *little*...” Punz is still staring between Tommy and the hole in the ground like it won’t fully compute. “Wait– Why’s he all bloody then?”

“That one is actually nothing to do with me. Tommy did it all by himself! Isn’t that *right*, Tommy?” Dream leans down to his eye-level, taunting, talking to him like a dog. “I was just filling him in on our little... our little *craft* project,” Dream says. “I think I’ll leave our story time there for now, Tommy. Maybe next time I’ll tell you some fun little details, like...” Dream can’t resist. Being able to concoct whatever horror story he thinks will upset Tommy the most is too much freedom, he’s almost giddy with it. “Like I’ll tell you how Ranboo screamed for Tubbo to come *save* him.” Dream remembers a little detail from long ago, Tubbo furiously telling him *crying burns him*, about Ghostbur, but making the mistake of glancing at Ranboo too. “I definitely made him cry. Did you know that his own tears burn him too?”

“Dream,” Punz says sharply.

Dream looks up at him expectantly, daring him to say the truth.

Punz does no such thing, rather a well measured, “we need him functional. This isn’t doing that.”

“Aw, fine, you’re no fun. Come on, Tommy. *Now* I’m done, promise. You can go back to your room, get washed up a bit, and I’ll swing by later with some food and a revive book for you to work on,” he says it like he’s offering a snack and coloring pages. Dream starts walking toward the hall, leaving Tommy on the floor. “Come on, Tommy, I don’t have all day. If you’re too slow, maybe I’ll just shove you in the dark cell for a bit until you’re more up for working.”

Tommy almost doesn’t even want to try. He knows he won’t be able to walk on his broken knee, but the thought of enduring the humiliation of crawling to fulfill Dream’s whims, he’d rather take the dark cell. At this point he cannot be bothered with his own comfort.

Punz huffs irritably, walking toward Tommy. Tommy flinches back. Punz pauses, staring at him almost accusingly. He doesn’t look over at Dream waiting in the doorway. He walks past Tommy to the ruined grave and reaches down. He pulls the scrap of pipe from the earth without much hassle, offering it to Tommy.

“Are you gonna give him a sword next?” Dream says dryly.

“It’s a fucking iron pipe, Dream. What’s that gonna do to netherite? Besides, he’s...” Punz doesn’t have the words to describe Tommy’s physical state. “He’s not gonna be able to do any damage any time soon.”

Tommy stares dully at it, accepting wearily. Even with the pipe as a crutch, it’s an agonizing struggle to even stand. Punz almost asks why Dream didn’t just heal him, but he knows why. And he has a feeling if he asks, Dream will say some bullshit that he’s not *allowed* to heal Tommy. Right now, Punz would prefer the plausible deniability of not asking. Tommy struggles toward the hall, unable to bear putting any weight on that leg, and as per usual, his left leg isn’t exactly helpful.

Punz lets out another irritated sigh. Tommy almost squeaks, startled and too weak to properly yelp, when Punz grabs his arm and pulls it around his shoulder, still basically dragging Tommy down the hall. The pipe clatters to the floor behind him.

“Aw, isn’t that sweet of you, Punz?” Dream says mockingly, opening Tommy’s cell door.

Punz roughly carries him across the threshold, holding him just by his arm around his shoulder. He doesn’t help Tommy sit down on his bed, he just slowly lets go until Tommy collapses on the floor with a pained gasp. Punz is quick to make his exit, as if embarrassed by the potential for his help to be mistaken for sympathy.

“Talk to you later, Tommy! Oh, and, I just thought of this, maybe I won’t bury you again any time soon, but if you fuck up, maybe I’ll move my new decorations in here, huh? Might brighten up the place.”

The cell door shuts, and Tommy remains on the floor for a time, silence pressing in.

His mouth hurts.

Tommy struggles to sit up, arms trembling from the meager efforts. He wishes he hadn’t dropped the pipe, he’d just been startled by Punz coming up behind him. Nonetheless, Tommy has to drag himself over to the sink, fighting to pull himself up onto the chest beside it, his whole body straining, his chest hurting, just from that. Tommy stares at the tepid water remaining in the bottom of the sink. He cannot see his reflection properly, but that’s probably a mercy. He turns on the faucet and puts his whole head under it, washing the dirt from his face, rinsing it from his mouth, and then drinking until he thinks he might puke.

Then he does puke, just water and bile and some mud, back into the sink.

He drinks again.

“W-Wil..?” Tommy calls out, voice less frail now that he’s had water.

There is no reply. Maybe he’s not being loud enough.

“*Wil-*” His voice breaks, throat aching, but surely that was loud enough. Maybe Wilbur is asleep.

Or unconscious. Or dead.

“Wilbur, I—” Tommy stops, getting choked up. He leans back against the damp stone bricks, eyes closed. “I’m sorry. I... I miss you,” he feels a bit delirious. It takes him a moment to remember what he’s sorry for. Oh, right. *You killed your brother.* “F-Fuck...”

Tommy cries out weakly, cowering back, when the cell door opens again. He hadn’t expected Dream to return so soon.

But it’s not Dream. It’s Punz.

Punz stares at him, careful and calculating. Tommy says nothing, staring right back, waiting for Punz to move.

Finally, Punz speaks. “Dream isn’t here. He said...” Punz pauses, looking annoyed, staring at the filthy, bloodied water on the floor. “He said he’s going *fishing*.”

Tommy still says nothing.

Punz looks back up at him, still so cautious, like Tommy is the dangerous one here. The silence continues and Tommy is about to break and tell him to just get it over with whatever it is, when finally, Punz comes to some conclusion.

“I want to make a deal with you.”

Chapter End Notes

I said no more outside world and I meant it, alright? Dream isn't gonna risk going back to the Mainlands!! No way in hell! But he doesn't need to :)

Hope you're not... disappointed?? that I didn't torment more of our little guys?? idk. this is I think bad enough lmao.

Chapter 31

Chapter Notes

CW: Self harm, dead bodies, descriptions of injuries/gore.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tommy stares at Punz, eyes narrowed, wary. “I’ve got nothing to fucking give, dickhead. What do you think I can do for you? Put in a good word with the devil the next time I see him?”

Punz does his best to bottle his irritation. “No. And I really think you’re gonna want to take this *seriously*, Tommy. This is your only way out of here.”

Tommy sits up, calculating, searching for a lie. “What... What is it you want, Punz?” Tommy’s tone sobers immediately.

“I want the revive book. Obviously,” Punz waits for a moment, but Tommy is just staring at him, wary and shaky. Punz sighs. “Do you want a health pot? Will that make it easier for you to talk?”

Tommy doesn’t reply, he’s thinking very fast and with more than a little difficulty. He’s still disoriented from the past days.

“Tommy?” Punz says sharply, demanding his attention.

“G-Give me a minute, just give me a minute to fucking *think*—” Tommy almost covers his ears. He’s in pain, thoughts feel vague and fuzzy.

Punz huffs, rummaging for a health potion. “Take it. I need you functional.”

“I-I *am* functional, you dickhead—” Tommy snaps hoarsely. Punz offers him a potion and Tommy waves him off. “Don’t.”

“*What?*”

“You... you can’t heal me, ‘cause Dream will know we talked, so,” Tommy shakes his head fiercely. He is shockingly coherent considering he has a harshly broken bone untreated and maybe an hour ago he was still buried alive.

Punz rolls his eyes, sifting through his supplies once more. “Take a golden apple, then. It won’t do much surface level repair, but it’ll give you some energy, take care of the pain.”

Tommy stares at the offered apple. He almost doesn't want to accept *anything* from Punz, but by god does something to numb the pain sound nice right now. He accepts, snatching his hand back quickly, as if expecting Punz to change his mind. Tommy stares at his own trembling hand, assessing the apple. He forgot how nice it was to have food, to have something that made this all easier.

Punz is patient to a point, letting him eat and mull it over, but that runs thin.

"Okay, you heard me, Tommy. You know what I want."

Tommy thinks this over carefully, searching for a risk, staring at the floor as he continues to nibble on the apple. "I don't have any of the revive books. Dream does. Why don't you just ask him?"

"Because, Dream will give me *copies*, if he feels like it, but I can't read it. I can't make them myself, but soon *you*—"

"I'll have it memorized, got it..." Tommy waves him off, thinking hard, cogs still slow to turn. "And... And what'll you... what'll you give me?"

"That part isn't obvious either?" Punz scoffs. "I get you out of here."

"You're gonna help me escape?" Tommy asks sharply. He doesn't trust it.

"Well, not *necessarily*—"

"Of course, you're full of shit, you fucking dick—"

"*But,*" Punz cuts in more sharply, "I won't have fun torturing you for the rest of time. And it's not like I *want* to keep you locked away somewhere, but I need that book. And I know you won't want to give it to me because you'll think I'll just kill you. I'm thinking we could figure something out. I'll keep you somewhere *temporarily*, and once I have that book, I'll have no reason to keep you there, right? Better than anything Dream has offered. At least I'm open to negotiation."

"Right, sure, I knew you were full of shit," Tommy snaps, that alone taking far too much effort. He's still thinking it over. Punz *is* at least open to negotiation, or at least that's what he is telling him, and as long as Tommy has the revive book, *he* has power over Punz. *Punz probably won't fucking bury you alive. That alone is worth it.* "If I agree to this, and right now that's a pretty big *if*, Wilbur comes too. I won't cooperate if he's not there."

Punz moves to make some irritated retort, but Tommy isn't finished.

"A-And if you think you can just torture me until I tell you the fucking book, that you won't actually need to listen to anything I say— well, I have a *high pain tolerance*, don't I?" Tommy nods once, sitting back, arms folded over his chest like that settles the matter. "And why the fuck would I give you the one thing you want if your plan is just to move me to another fucking cage, eh?" Tommy's voice is still weak and shaky, he manages to keep a note of defiance even as he wants to curl into a ball and never move again.

Punz frowns. He clearly had expected this to go better. “Really? Between me and Dream, there’s *still* some debate for you? I won’t treat you like a fucking chewtoy. I won’t fucking engineer your brother against you, how about *that* for an offer?” He snaps.

Tommy gives him a scathing look, weary, weak, and unfazed. “Punz, my dearest...” he grimaces, “*slightly* less fucked up captor, it’s not about *you* being an alternative to something worse, it’s about me knowing you can offer me better,” he gestures grandly to the dingy cell, arms still covered in dirt, leaning back against the wall.

Punz is trying to think of a way around it. This offer was not drawn up for him out of some moral obligation. He didn’t decide Dream pushed too far and he had to come to the rescue, rather, he got tired of waiting for Dream to decide to share and now sees an alternative in Tommy. So he’ll play along for now. “Meaning?”

“You are gonna get me and Wil out of here. And *only* once I see Wilbur back among friends, I will pause, throw you an un-burning copy of the revive book, and then I leave, unharmed, and you leave with your little immortality project ready to go, alright?” Tommy knows this is bold, and part of him has this nagging fear that if he pushes, Punz will give up and go back to waiting for Dream to suddenly become a better collaborator.

Punz stares at him, calculating. He’s a loner, he doesn’t need civilization, but he did prefer at least having it as an option. He is very much aware the only way he can exist in the server unhunted is by freeing Tommy and Wilbur. “If you swear to vouch for me that I rescued you, I’ll take you back to your little friends.”

“And, what, how do you know I won’t just tell them you’re the fucking worst the moment we get there?” Tommy scowls.

“I mean, I probably won’t stick around, just to be safe. Besides, Tommy, why are you pointing out that you could betray me? Not exactly encouraging me to negotiate.”

“Point taken,” Tommy huffs. “I mean, wouldn’t be a lie if you *do* end up getting us out.” Tommy is still trying to think. His leg still hurts him, the bleeding was stopped by the golden apple at least, and the pain is far better than it was, but it does make it harder to focus. “I want better insurance. When you plan on doing... whatever you’re planning on doing, you should send our coordinates to Tubbo.”

“No, no I’m not doing that.”

“Why?” Tommy snaps.

“*Because*, that means you have no reason to have me help you, because you’ll know your little friends are coming,” Punz shoots back. “How stupid do you think I am? Maybe I’d *consider* it, if you give me the book first.”

“Obviously not! I’m not telling you fuck all until we’re away from Dream.”

“Then I’m not telling anyone about where you are until we’re away from Dream and *you* start giving me the revive book,” Punz snaps back. He is also aware that Tommy could forget

some part of it, he could just lie, in that case, Punz will bargain with Dream to get Tommy back in exchange for the book.

“Fine,” Tommy says, arms folded over his chest.

“Fine!”

Tommy glares at him. He sighs. “If you can get us out of here, me *and* Wilbur,” Tommy laughs dryly, staring dully at the floor. He takes a moment, knowing his voice is going to tremor if he speaks, he can feel a lump in his throat. Right now, he cannot look at this as anything more than a hypothetical. Tommy refuses to put his faith in Punz. He’s never been able to get away before, he will not expect to now. Nonetheless: “Get me and Wil out, I’ll... I’ll give you whatever you fucking want.”

Punz was both annoyed by the resistance Tommy had given him before and is just as surprised that he seems to cave so easily now. “Good. We have a deal.” Punz offers him a hand.

Tommy stares at it scathingly. “I do those theatrics to humor Dream’s little god complex, do you really need me to hold your hand too?”

Punz bristles, pulling his hand back. “I guess not. I was just following *your* lead.”

“How kind.”

“Hey, *I* am your only fucking hope here, no need to act like that doesn’t mean anything to you,” Punz cannot resist the impulse to defend himself. “I’m *saving* you, and you’re still gonna be a brat about it?”

Tommy’s eyebrows raise, smirking, in his feeble state, he looks more manic than anything. “Oh? Is that what you’re doing? You’re being a real *hero*, are you, Punz? Nothing but generosity from the old mercenary, ay? Of course, of course, that’s why I have to bargain for my freedom? *Hm?* You *are* my only hope right now, Punz. That doesn’t mean you’re any better than Dream being *kind* enough to offer me food if I do what he says. Keep your fucking high horse to yourself.”

Punz doesn’t have a retort. He still expected some more gratefulness from Tommy, but he can’t say he doesn’t understand his reservations. “Okay. I get you and Wilbur out.” Punz turns to leave.

“Oi! Hey, hey, where the fuck are *you* going?” Tommy shouts after him weakly. “What’s the *plan*, dickhead?”

Punz huffs irritably, pausing. He hesitates over his words. “I am... still working on it.”

“Oh, you’ve got no fucking clue, got it.”

“No,” Punz snaps. “I am... I’m planning on doing something on a hunt,” he looks back over his shoulder, toward the open corridor. Dream *should* message him and ask him to stasis him back since he knows he’s down here, but there’s every chance he’s wrong. “So, nothing

immediately, but maybe next time it rains. And that's *only* if I know for sure you have it memorized before then."

Tommy nods slowly, grudgingly. "Yeah, that's fair. Or not fair, but... it's got *logic* for a selfish prick like you."

Punz is working with Tommy, yes, but he is more than a little tired of Tommy belittling him at every opportunity. Somehow even after he'd snapped and hurt him, Tommy still has the audacity to insult him. Punz's tolerance is limited.

"Y'know, Tommy, I guess I understand you not feeling like you owe me anything, acting like I don't have a moral leg to stand on, you're right about that," Punz steps closer, Tommy sits up, pressed against the wall, wary. He would try to stand if he could, but his knee means that is currently not an option. "But me being your only hope isn't fucking *cute*, you got that? It means *I* am the deciding factor in whether or not you get to see the fucking sun again. What if I took you, but I left Wilbur behind, huh? You can say that you wouldn't talk all you want, you'd still be stuck with me, and you wouldn't have Wilbur. I am your only hope and therefore I am your only fucking mercy," Punz takes another step forward, his foot coming down on Tommy's mangled leg, Tommy bites back a whimper, hands curled into fists. "Why don't you act like it?"

Tommy takes a shaky breath, clearly warding off tears, but he *still* finds a way to talk back. "Y-You're gonna... you're gonna have to try a lot harder than that if you— if you want me to be nice to you."

Punz's anger is sharp, his boot presses down further until Tommy has to choke back a scream and an already broken bone crunches horribly. "Guess I'll just have to try harder then, huh?"

Tommy says nothing, Punz waits, giving him the chance to dare to retort, but all he can bring himself to do is glare at the ground in silence, trying to hide his trembling from the pain, even as his shaky breathing gives him away. Punz leaves, and he refuses to understand why he feels sick.

"F-Fuck..." Tommy gasps the moment the cell door shuts again, trembling hands reaching out toward his bloodied knee before pulling back. There is nothing he can do for himself right now. The bone is broken enough to tear skin, the bleeding slow, but hastened from Punz exacerbating the damage. Maybe in a few hours he'll bleed out, get to see Wilbur. He knows he shouldn't have accepted a health potion from Punz, but god he wishes he could have. At least now alone, he has no reason to try not to sob, unbroken knee tucked up to his chest, and filthy hands covering his face, the darkness reminds him of being trapped underground, so he stops, forced to stare at the gruesome wound instead.

Right now there is nothing he can focus on except the feeling of his shattered kneecap shifting underneath his skin, and of the new monster growing and festering right outside his door. Punz is not as bad as Dream, but he seems almost hellbent on changing that. Punz is still his only way out, but Tommy wouldn't put it past his luck to mean he will trade one tormentor for another. It's not like he has anything else to go on.

Wilbur is exhausted; or rather, he is in theory. In Limbo, he doesn't get tired. There is this bone-deep weariness that sinks in like lead and that is almost worse than any mortal feeling that can be cured with sleep. Wilbur has been in Limbo for days now. Maybe weeks. He isn't sure. At some point along the way he'd lost his internal clock and he'd given up on trying to get it back.

Wilbur had screamed and thrown himself at the walls early on, but that loses its appeal in the first few days.

So now he sits. Legs folded, staring down at the game of solitaire he's laid out in front of him, but he's not playing, instead receding deeper into his head, as the *real* horror gnawing at him is not the dull white tile or the days passing by between blinks, it's the thought of Tommy, screaming his name, begging him to help him, all of those weeks ago. He assumed Tommy would die at some point while buried, Dream of course never letting him stay that way for long, but he doesn't understand how he hasn't seen him yet. Although, Wilbur hasn't been dead for *that* long in the living world.

Dream had killed him, *done* something, cut open his back for some reason, and then revived him. Wilbur had barely gotten his bearings, trying to feel at whatever wound had been made on him— it was not merely a cut, Wilbur's back had *burned*, raw tissue exposed to the air— and Dream had killed him again.

And here he had remained.

Wilbur doesn't care what Dream did to *him* while dead, and it's not like he's tormenting himself with hypotheticals about what could be happening to Tommy. He *knows* exactly where his little brother is, and he wishes it could physically tear him apart from the inside out, the feeling, the helplessness, it just aches and aches within him and he can only stare at these stupid fucking cards and wait for Dream to bring him back. Although, Dream bringing him back doesn't mean fuck all because *clearly* he cannot save his brother. As always, his best efforts aren't good enough.

Wilbur's frustration bleeds sharp again and he scatters the cards, giving up on a game that had been going on at least a day now. He endures maybe ten minutes alone with his thoughts. He gathers the cards and begins laying out rows.

"Wake up."

~

Tommy returns to the revive book with renewed vigor. Dream had given him a health potion, so his knee while still sore was no longer a shattered, open wound, and had even given him some fish. Tommy, if he did not think about the last few days and the many pains that came with it, could find some solace in this.

Solace does not linger when Tommy cannot bury the nagging thought of what he had seen earlier that day. It's like it's burned onto his eyelids. He blinks away pages and ink and only finds mangled flesh.

Half of his concentration is diverted by his efforts not to vomit. He needs to stop fixating it, to stop obsessing over it.

Ranboo's was black and white. Dream carved it out of his back. Said he shot him running away, and then he must've held him down, gotten off his suit jacket, and cut—

Tommy stares at the sigils, focusing on them with desperate intensity. He doesn't understand them, it's not like there are words to distract him, so even as he tries this, the violence continues.

He killed Sam. And Niki. Said he had to be fast to cut their— their pieces off before they despawned. So, he did it after he killed them. That's something.

That's nothing.

Tommy stops, breathing shakily. “Stop... stop thinking about it, just fucking *stop it!*” Tommy crushes the quill in his hand, chest aching as he still does his best not to puke. He can't do this, he can't *think—*

Dream said he would make sure they knew it was your fault. He didn't say how. Did he mock them as he cut them open? Did Ant wonder why it was him? He didn't know you super well. Not as well as the others. If Dream told them that you chose, did Eret think you were finally paying them back for the final control room?

“Shut up— *shut up shut up shut the fuck up!*” Tommy's vision is blurred by tears, teeth gritted until his jaw aches, and before he can stop himself, he takes the mangled quill and stabs the nib into his left palm until ink and blood spurt out and stain the book he had been working on, ruining it.

Finally, peace. Tommy's thoughts stop racing, and he instead focuses on the pain, managing to cling to enough sanity to take the quill out instead of stabbing it deeper as if hoping to dig some more relief from tendons and then bone. Tommy takes a deep breath, a sigh of too much relief as he holds his left hand in a tight fist, feeling his own pulse thrumming against his fingernails as blood swells up between his knuckles and drips down his arm.

Your friends aren't safe. They're never going to be safe until Dream is dead.

Maybe Punz is gonna get you out. And when Dream inevitably comes after you again, you kill him.

He's on one life. If he dies, he never comes back.

And if he tries to kill someone on his way out, you can bring them back.

It gets easier. All of it. Tommy's *right* hand has forgotten the pain over the last few deaths, but the callouses heal back. His left remains an open wound, but every time his mind threatens to wander toward those morbid curiosities, he tightens it into a fist and lets his nails dig into the open wound until the blood continues and the pain sharpens enough that he can keep moving. Eventually, Tommy realizes he's stopped referencing the original book at all.

He's so relieved he almost wants to stop then and there, but Dream had yet again given him his ultimatum, he had to fill up every journal Dream gave him.

Tommy with three empty books remaining, flinches enough to smear the ink when his cell door opens.

"Tommy? How's it going?" Dream leans in like pompous teacher. "Oh, you're almost done. Good."

"I got it," Tommy mutters, somewhere between irritation and vicious pride.

"What was that, Tommy?" Dream enters, standing over him, looking down at the page he's working on with disinterest.

"I s-said I fuckin' *got it*," Tommy says again. "M-Memorized it..." His right hand trembles as he halfheartedly continues, unsure if Dream wants him to stop or not.

"Really?" Dream crouches down beside him, grabbing his left hand, turning it over to stare at his bloody palm. "What's this?"

"D-Don't- Stop it... let me go," Tommy says wearily, even as he doesn't try to pull away, he merely pleads for Dream to choose to stop.

"Well, what is it? This isn't like when your other hand got messed up," Dream tilts his head, assessing the wound, his thumb brushing over it, wiping away blood, and then his grip tightens, finger digging into the wound.

"Stop, stop, *stopstopstopstop*—" Tommy whispers raggedly, eyes shut tightly as he waits for Dream to let go. He whimpers when he feels Dream grab his right hand, taking the new quill from his hand. Tommy dares to open his eyes, seeing Dream line up the quill with the wound. "*I fucking stabbed it is that what you want to hear?!*" Tommy hisses sharply, yanking his hand away.

"Hm, why'd you do that?" Dream doesn't scold him for pulling away, instead remaining curious, twirling the quill through his fingers.

"Don't- Doesn't matter..." Tommy mutters, arms folded across his chest protectively.

"Alright, fine," Dream laughs. "So, you said you have it memorized?"

"Y-Yes, yeah. It's- Yeah," Tommy nods shakily, staring down at the half finished page, itching for a quill to finish it. It feels almost like a compulsion now. He knows what comes next, and he *must* write it.

"Okay. Good," Dream takes one of the blank books in one hand, and grabs Tommy's arm with the other, dragging him to his feet with a yelp. "I'll have you prove it real quick, but then, we'll move onto phase two."

"W-What's—" Tommy struggles to keep up, feet dragging and legs still weak. "What's phase two?"

“You’ll see, obviously.”

Tommy mumbles some wordless agreement as Dream opens the door to the neighboring cell. Wilbur is dead, as he had been forced to assume hours earlier where he’d gotten no reply. He lies flat on his back, a crossbow bolt through his skull.

“W-Why’d you—”

“Doesn’t matter,” Dream shoves Tommy forward. “Here,” he offers the blank book. “Prove it.”

Tommy hesitates, looking at the empty doorway behind him. “C-Can I finish the other one first?”

“No. I want you to start over and prove it,” Dream leaves no room for argument, learning against the wall, waiting.

“A-And you’re gonna... you’re gonna be here the whole time?” Tommy scuffs his feet on the wet bricks. He stops when he looks down and sees that it is not just sea water, but Wilbur’s blood as well.

“Yep. Gotta make sure you actually memorized it. Now *go*.”

Tommy gives Dream one last wary look before sitting down far enough from Wilbur’s body his blood is no longer spread there. He does his best to ignore his brother’s corpse and his tormentor’s vile mask watching him.

It’s almost comforting now, in some horrible way. Tommy knows what he’s doing, and the ritual gives him something like peace. Dream gets bored and leaves him twenty pages in. Tommy glances up as he goes, and only once sure he’s not coming back does he speak.

“Wonder why he killed you, Wil,” Tommy murmurs, glancing at the open doorway occasionally. “He hurt you before?” Tommy glances over at the dark pool surrounding his corpse. “Lot of blood... but guess it makes sense if it was a headshot... and if he didn’t bring you back, you would’ve had a lot of time to bleed...”

Tommy keeps writing, but at this point he can multitask.

“He did something really bad to our friends, Wil,” Tommy says softly. “H-He hurt Niki. And Eret.” Tommy sighs shakily. “And Ranboo and some others but you don’t know them like Niki and Eret. I dunno... maybe you’re still pissed at Eret... *I’m* not...”

Silence. Tommy writes. And when those thoughts burrow in again, the image of flesh, he talks.

“Once I got this bit down, there isn’t much left, see?” Tommy holds up the book, angling it toward the corpse before shaking his head, as if coming out of a daze. It doesn’t work quite as well as pain, but talking to Wilbur is enough to get him working again.

Tommy finishes the book and buries the impulse to reach for the next one. He glances up at the empty doorway. Dream doesn't appear. Tommy, feverishly, desperately, looks around for a way to burn it. He doesn't know why he thought there would be a way accessible to him.

There is. You just have to sneak down the hall to the dark cell.

Tommy wants to. He wants to avoid Dream, and revive his brother, and hug him without being torn away from him. So he stands, slowly, carefully, on shaky and injured legs. The bone is no longer broken, but Tommy still presses one hand to the stone brick to keep himself standing as he enters the corridor, the book clasped tightly in the other. He makes it down the hallway. He sees the doorway into Dream's library.

Dream would want him to turn here, and tell him he'd finished it.

Trying to sneak past is dangerous.

Dangerous as in *this type of shit is what got you buried alive.*

Tommy hates himself for it, but he stops. He turns into the library.

"Dream?"

Dream looks up at him from where he'd been writing in his own book. For a moment Tommy forgets, and is puzzled by why Dream left to fill out *another* revive book. Right. Dream is *still* taking notes.

"You're done?" Dream puts away his own book, standing.

Tommy steps back. "Y-Yes. Yeah, I finished it."

Dream ruffles his hair. "Good job. Come on, let's go make sure." He walks past him down the hall back to the cell, Tommy following.

"How do I burn it?"

"What?" Dream glances back at him. "Oh, you don't do anything," he holds out his hand.

Tommy frowns, but gives up the book without a fight.

Dream takes out a flint and steel, lighting the edge of the page before dropping the book on the ground. "Wake up."

Tommy shudders, hearing those words, from this side of things or otherwise, it sets him on edge.

Wilbur sits up sharply with a gasp.

"Good job, Tommy!" Dream says again.

Wilbur hears his brother's name and turns around sharply, staring at Tommy with something desperate in his eyes, looking him over, a mess of blood and dirt, but at least he's *there*.

"You're..."

Tommy takes one step forward before stopping. He glances at Dream, who indicates neither approval or disapproval. "Y-Yeah, got myself out," Tommy says softly, still looking at Dream, waiting for him to punish him for even speaking to Wilbur.

"Yeah, well done, whatever, okay! It's time for phase two," Dream interjects before Wilbur can reply.

Wilbur staggers to his feet, and as always it's too easy for him to put himself between Dream and Tommy. This time, Tommy doesn't move away.

"Don't get so weird about it," Dream scoffs.

"What are you gonna do, Dream?" Tommy asks quietly. He wants to hug Wilbur. He doesn't think he's allowed.

"Oh, I'm not gonna do much, really. I'm going to kill you, in a bit," Dream says, adding that last part when Wilbur looks ready to try something. "And you, Tommy, you're gonna bring yourself back."

Chapter End Notes

I have been waiting to get to this point for twenty goddamn chapters.

Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

CW: oooh. um. mutilation. death. graphic depictions violence. broken bones.

fuck it we ball.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“What? What do you mean he’s gonna *bring himself back*? Do you fucking hear yourself, Dream?” Wilbur blusters.

“Shut up, Wilbur, you’re not here to *talk*,” Dream scoffs.

“Then why the fuck am I? What do you think you’ll get out of this, Dream?” Wilbur keeps himself firmly between Dream and Tommy. He mostly thinks Dream is insane, but another part of him is terrified by what this could mean.

“*Wilbur*,” Dream sounds almost endeared, stepping forward, putting his hands on his shoulders, Wilbur tugging away, but Dream doesn’t let go. Dream sighs, as if to say *what am I going to do with you?* “What is it you think is gonna happen? You’re *scared* Tommy will be able to do something that I’ve already done to him a hundred times over?” Dream tuts him, patting his cheek. “You’re just looking for a hill to die on, huh? Not like that’s anything new.”

Wilbur cannot think of a single retort. *He* isn’t even quite sure why he is so opposed to Tommy doing this other than Dream wanting it which never leads to anything good.

“You gonna keep your mouth shut now?” Dream asks.

“Depends, are you going to let go of me?” Wilbur sneers. “Didn’t think you’d put yourself back in range of my mouth, Dream. Maybe I’ll rip your throat out after all.”

Rather than let go, Dream leans in closer. “I dare you, Wilbur. I *dare* you to attack me, right now, with Tommy here. I don’t think it will go well for either of you, don’t you?”

Wilbur glares at him, but he doesn’t dare move against him.

“Better,” Dream is so fucking smug as he pinches Wilbur’s cheek before finally letting go. He turns to Tommy. “Do you understand what I’m asking you to do?”

Tommy is quiet, staring at the ground, clearly thinking carefully. After a pause, he nods.

“Good. If you don’t do this, Tommy. I’m going to hurt Wilbur. If you take too long to do it, I’m going to hurt him too. Work fast, alright?” Dream is still vile and patronizing.

Tommy looks more solemn at this, eyebrows furrowed together, some conclusion met that he doesn’t bother voicing aloud, but again, he nods. Then, he hesitates.

“Do you have a question, Tommy?”

“But... if I... if I can’t do it, maybe I don’t remember it all or... or I make a mistake, then what?” Tommy looks up at him, eyes grey and weary.

“Then I hurt Wilbur. What’s not clicking?” Dream laughs.

“Right...” Tommy blinks, struggling to focus his thoughts. “Then— sorry, I meant to ask, if I can’t do it... if I can’t do it *period*, like, no matter what I try, then what?”

Dream steps closer to Tommy, hands folded in front of him, head tilted patronizingly. “I... hurt Wilbur? What’s confusing you, Tommy?”

Tommy frowns, irritation so much quieter than it used to be. “But... but if it’s not possible, that’s not— that’s not my fault, that’s not something I can— I can *control*, so—”

Dream laughs. “Then maybe you should start praying for it to work. See, you have a habit of lying, Tommy. Making problems where there shouldn’t be any. You can’t *actually* expect me to take your word for it, can you?”

Tommy has no defense, he remains fixated on the bloody stone bricks. Dream has no reason to trust him when it comes to Limbo. Limbo is the one place where Tommy has remained out of Dream’s control. “It’s not... it’s not fair...” he murmurs.

“Oh my god, you’re going on about *fairness* again?” Dream huffs. “I think you’ve been slipping, Tommy. And I won’t pretend you haven’t gotten better, I do think burying you alive did the trick at least *somewhat*, but I think you’ve forgotten the rules. Especially since Wilbur joined us.”

Tommy looks back up at him, eyes wide, shoulders hunched inward. “The... the rules? No, no I haven’t— I haven’t forgotten the rules, Dream, what’re you talking about?!”

Dream sighs. “Case and *point*, Tommy. You shouldn’t be disagreeing with me. Ever. If I tell you you’ve done something wrong, your only job is to *apologize* and try and make it up to me.”

“S-Sorry, I’m sorry, Dream—”

Another laugh. “Oh, good timing, Tommy. Like, *really*? Why would that cut it now? I’m right. You don’t seem especially worried about this whole deal, actually. In general. Don’t you *want* to revive yourself? To protect Wilbur?”

“Yeah, but—”

“Cut it out with the *excuses*, Tommy,” Dream steps closer.

“Sorry,” Tommy wilts, stepping back until he hits the wall.

“Dream—” Wilbur steps forward to meet Dream, reaching out as if to stop him from coming any closer to Tommy.

“Wilbur, you are just *asking* to make things worse, huh?” Dream knees Wilbur in the gut, sending him to the ground with a harsh gasp. He keeps moving toward Tommy, dragging him toward the front of the cell, out of Wilbur’s reach.

“I’ll— I’m gonna try, alright? I will—” Tommy stammers, still refusing to look at Dream’s face and his stupid mask.

“Oh, I know you will, Tommy. I think you at least have the common sense left to know failing isn’t going to be pretty,” Dream tuts him.

“I’ll do it. I will,” Tommy tries to force some certainty into his voice. “I— I know how to do it, and— and I will do it.”

“Good. That’s good to hear, Tommy.” A pause, Dream apparently considering something, looking at Tommy carefully. He seems to reach his conclusion. Dream grabs Tommy by the hair, slamming his skull into the stone bricks.

“*Tommy!*” Wilbur tries to go to him, but the chain keeps him just out of reach.

“I *told* you, you shouldn’t have talked, Wilbur. I’ve got to kill him *slower* now,” Dream is somehow both scolding and whiny.

Tommy isn’t dead yet, leaning against the bricks where Dream had let him fall, head spinning, blood pouring into his face, getting in his eyes. He can’t see. He doesn’t see Dream’s Netherite boot swing back at his head, but he definitely feels it, his jaw shattering under the impact, and his skull ricocheting back against the brick, and only then does he stop moving.

Wilbur stares, his horror weak and useless, at Tommy’s crumpled corpse.

“Honestly, that wasn’t too slow. Easy,” Dream shrugs. “And now we wait for him to bring himself back.”

“Bring himself back...” Wilbur repeats hoarsely, staring at Tommy’s shattered skull, bile rising in the back of his throat.

“You’re really that surprised? I thought you had *some* brains, Wilbur,” Dream says mockingly.

Wilbur has, albeit a bit more slowly than Tommy, understood the proceedings. If Tommy does this, Dream has figured out how to make himself immortal without the help of anyone else. It’s not exactly something Wilbur is enthused by, but it raises other questions as well. “And... and if it works, if he can revive himself, what happens next?”

“Were you not listening? It feels pretty clear to me, but sure, I’ll repeat myself. If Tommy does it right, well, *you* don’t get hurt, Wilbur, isn’t that nice of me?”

“No,” Wilbur closes his eyes. He can still see Tommy’s corpse. “No, I meant– Where does that leave us?”

Dream tilts his head, almost curious. “Us?”

“Tommy and I.”

Dream hums, stepping closer, arms folded over his chest. “I don’t know what you mean, Wilbur.”

Wilbur looks back at Dream, hatred projected as if he could use it as a weapon. “I *mean*, Dream, you won’t need us anymore. So what the fuck are you gonna do to us?”

“Hm. *Need* you, no, although, saying I *ever* needed you, Wilbur, is a *bit* of a stretch,” Dream laughs. “But not a bad question, though, fair enough.” He mulls it over. “Maybe if I’m feeling generous I’ll let you two live in the same cell. And I could shake things up with the hunts, even. Try a different biome. Maybe I’ll bring Tommy some more chickens. He won’t even be able to throw a tantrum if I kill them, because now he knows how to bring them back. Punz will probably want me to share the book so he can leave, maybe I’ll keep it to myself a *little* bit longer, especially because he’s not here for this bit, but still, eventually he’ll get thrown a bone and he’ll probably jump ship. So, I’ll have to keep *you* on a shorter leash, Wilbur, just to make sure you don’t get any ideas of overpowering me, but other than that, hm,” Dream shrugs. “I don’t see why me being immortal has to change much. It’ll make things more convenient for me too. When I kill you guys, you can bring yourselves back, which, well,” Dream sighs. “That *could* get sorta annoying too. Being able to drag around your corpses was less hassle than dealing with you alive sometimes, but chaining you up is basically the same thing.”

Wilbur doesn’t know what answer he expected. Wilbur still isn’t used to feeling doomed. Or rather, he’s not used to feeling doomed in a way that didn’t feel a little glorious, even if he regrets the mentality now. Wilbur gives a jerky nod before he sits back on the edge of his bed, refusing to look at Tommy’s corpse, unsure if he wants his brother to bring himself back or not.

Dream’s calm enthusiasm lasts for a whole twenty minutes before he starts to get agitated. Wilbur watches its slow development, Dream first just shifting restlessly, then beginning to pace, then going over to Tommy’s body like he’s half considering bringing Tommy back himself.

“Calm yourself, it hasn’t been that fucking long,” Wilbur says dully.

“No– No, for *us* it hasn’t been that long, for *him*,” Dream points accusingly at Tommy’s corpse, “it’s been *hours*. How fucking long could it be taking?”

Wilbur shrugs. “A while?”

“*You* should probably care a little more, Wilbur, considering you’re the one who pays for it if he fails,” Dream snarls.

Wilbur doesn’t have the heart to be worried. “Whatever you’re planning on doing to me, it’s not like I have any control over it, even if Tommy manages it. I’ll save being terrified for when you’re *actually* torturing me or whatever...”

“Or *whatever*–?” Dream blusters. “I could cut your fucking tongue out, how about that? I don’t need you to be able to talk, Wilbur.”

Wilbur isn’t fearless, he’s just resigned. “I’m tired, Dream. There’s no game for us to win here, is there? I’m not gonna waste my time worrying about it,” he lies back on the bed, legs hanging off the side, arms spread, a distorted mixture of peace and melancholy swallowing him.

“Huh,” Dream’s tone reawakens Wilbur’s dread, just a bit, just enough that he looks back over at him.

“What?”

“Oh, nothing, nothing...” A pause, Wilbur still watching him, Dream very much aware of the attention. “Y’know, your brother said the same thing a few days ago. He was being all defiant, and part of his little rant was... *I’m tired*. And then I...” Dream sighs, almost wistfully. “And then I buried him alive.” A heavy pause. Dream shrugs. “So, who knows. If you wanna act like none of this matters, that’s okay. I’ll get you to care eventually.”

~

Punz had the faintest notion of a plan, and he’d done an assessment of Dream’s hunting grounds. He could set up a portal, hidden not far from here, and he could get Tommy and Wilbur a thousand blocks away across the Nether roof before Dream has even noticed he’s lost. Punz is good in a fight, but he’d prefer to not fight Dream if he can manage it. He’ll leave that task up to people like Technoblade once they’re back in the Mainlands. The more complicated factors are finding a way to break the stasis chambers without Dream knowing, as well as getting rid of Tommy’s stupid tracker bracelet. That one he won’t be able to do preemptively, he’ll have to do it during the hunt otherwise Dream will definitely notice.

He’d told Dream he just needed to get out of the bunker for a bit, that hadn’t raised any questions, but he doesn’t have the means to take anymore steps above ground, hence:

You whisper to Dream: stasis?

Dream doesn’t respond. Not for a while. Punz gets irritable.

You whisper to Dream: stasis?

Nothing.

You whisper to Dream: stasis?

Punz feels nervous. He doesn't know why. If those idiots have found a way to incapacitate Dream, that makes his job a whole lot easier.

You whisper to Dream: stasis?

Punz feels his stomach drop, and then he's hitting the trap door hard, knees protesting the impact.

"What the fuck could be so important that you needed to get back here?" Dream snaps. "God, you're as bad as Tommy sometimes!" He storms off.

Punz stays there, startled, taking a moment to get his bearings before following. "What's got you all stressed out?" Punz stops short in the doorway to Wilbur's cell. Wilbur lays back on his bed, apparently accustomed to the presence of Tommy's corpse collapsed in a corner. "...what's going on?"

"Wilbur," Dream snaps. "You explain." Dream goes back to brooding in the opposite corner, arms folded over his chest, staring at Tommy's corpse, waiting for it to move on its own.

Wilbur sighs loudly. "Dream is throwing a bitch fit because Tommy hasn't solved mortality all on his own in the past... I dunno, four-ish hours? I don't have a clock," Wilbur shrugs.

Punz processes, torn between curiosity and bafflement. "Explain more."

Wilbur sits up slowly. "Dream had Tommy memorize the book. You know this? Yes? Well, now he's killed Tommy, and he's waiting for Tommy to make a revive book *in Limbo* and... bring himself back," he gestures vaguely at Tommy's corpse, even if he doesn't look directly at it.

Punz looks sharply at Dream. "Could that work?"

"Are you fucking stupid?" Dream scoffs. "We're testing it out. How would *I* know?"

"And... he's been dead four hours."

"For *him* that's *days*," Dream says pointedly. "How many times can he fuck it up?!" He gives Tommy's corpse a sharp kick, but it's a far less satisfying violence when the body just slumps over more instead of actually reacting.

"Maybe... maybe he forgot part of it. Or something. You could bring him back and see?" Punz tries.

"No, he got it right. He wrote it from memory, it brought Wilbur back. It doesn't make *sense*," Dream whines.

"It's *Tommy*. He could've panicked and mixed something up," Punz shrugs. "What's the harm in bringing him back and checking?"

"No. No, I'm not doing that yet. *Tommy* is going to figure it out, or else *he* fucking pays for it," Dream points an accusing finger in Wilbur's direction. "Come on, I'm not gonna keep

wasting time here,” Dream storms out, nodding Punz out after him, shutting Wilbur’s cell behind him.

And then Wilbur is alone, save for Tommy’s unmoving corpse just out of his reach.

“Oh, god, I wish they hadn’t left me alone with you like this,” Wilbur glances at the body before quickly looking away. “You could’ve summoned a book, filled it out, and burned it in the first few hours. I *know* you could’ve. By now, you had getting stuff over there down.” Wilbur doesn’t know he’s doing the same thing Tommy had. Neither of them had had a moment of peace together while alive, so they’d both made do with a corpse. “So... that probably means you can’t. It isn’t possible, yeah?” Wilbur says gloomily, staring at the closed cell door because it’s easier than his brother’s corpse slumped against the bricks, skull and jaw shattered.

“That’s... that’s alright. Whatever he’s gonna do to me, nothing you can do to stop him. I’m alright with that,” Wilbur wrings his hands, fidgeting restlessly, still unaccustomed to his missing finger. He doesn’t know why he’s offering comfort to a dead boy. He doesn’t know what else to do with himself.

“I’m sorry, Tommy,” Wilbur says softly. “Really thought I... thought I could help you. At least a little more than I fucking have been doing...” Wilbur laughs bitterly. “Fuck... dunno why I bothered... or I guess I *do* know why. Not like I’m worth anything to anyone otherwise...” Wilbur sighs. “I guess I’m just sorry. Nothing else I can say, and I know if I said it while you could hear me, you’d tell me to shut up about it, so, guess all I can do is say it now. I’m sorry. You...” Wilbur glances at the body, sickened by the sight of his brother’s broken face. “You deserve so much more. More than me, at least,” Wilbur buries his head in his hands, weary and weighted. “More than me...” He murmurs.

The waiting game will always bring misery, but Wilbur is used to a far worse purgatory than this. Tommy’s corpse makes it harder. He does his best not to look at him, curled up on top of his bed, facing the wall, but still in the back of his mind he cannot forget his presence, torn between hoping he’ll suddenly hear his brother gasping for breath as he jolts back to life and at the very least silence meaning Dream hasn’t won.

Wilbur is startled from a doze by Dream’s return. The click of redstone rouses him just before Dream and Punz return to the cell, Dream motivated and irritable, Punz slower to follow.

“Nothing?!” Dream huffs at the sight of Tommy’s unmoving corpse.

“Obviously...” Wilbur says dully.

“*You* shouldn’t be so... *calm* Wilbur. Or *moody*. You realize *you’re* gonna pay for this,” Dream snaps.

“Oh?” Wilbur expresses mock terror, cupping his own cheeks. “Colour me surprised.”

Dream doesn’t bother with a retort, instead reaching for a revive book. With far more malice than usual, he leans over Tommy’s corpse and commands his resurrection, “wake up.”

Tommy gasps to life. He doesn't get the chance to sit up, he's pulled to his feet, Dream has him by the collar of his shirt, pinning him against the wall.

"D-Dream—" Tommy wheezes, fresh breath now knocked out of him.

"Not sure if you noticed, but *I* brought you back. That wasn't the *plan*, Tommy," Dream hisses.

"I... I tried," Tommy says weakly, holding onto Dream's wrist, as if he could stop the man from going further and grabbing him by the throat. "I tried a... *a thousand fucking times*, please believe me, I tried—" Tommy yelps as Dream throws him back to the ground.

"You *tried*, sure, *sure* you did, Tommy," Dream turns on a dime and makes for Wilbur. "You *tried*."

"Dream, *please!* Please, I tried!" Tommy staggers to his feet, running forward, trying to put himself between Dream and Wilbur. Dream knocks him aside easily, Tommy's head already pounding from his recently healed skull and now he scrapes it against the bricks again, blood on his face, but this time his palms take most of the damage, he stays conscious and coherent and continues to beg. "Dream I fucking swear I tried over and over and *over* and it wouldn't— It didn't— *please!*"

Wilbur stands, and he has no idea what he was planning on doing, surely not defending himself, but Dream beats him to any punch, grabbing him by the throat, turning and throwing Wilbur to the ground.

"Dream! P-Please, please I swear I did it all right! I did!" Tommy once more claws far more unsteadily to his feet, breathing raggedly as he tries to grab Dream's raised arm before his fist can come down on Wilbur's face. "*It isn't his fault! Please, I tried!*" Tommy rasps as loudly as he can and is rewarded by once more losing his breath, Dream elbowing him in the ribs until he's back on the ground.

"Punz, any day now you could lend a hand! I thought this was the one thing you gave a shit about," Dream snaps.

Punz sighs, irritated. "If it doesn't work, how's beating up Wilbur supposed to help?" Even as he complains, he moves forward and grabs Tommy's arm, dragging him to his feet and away from Wilbur.

"Let me—" Tommy pushes against Punz's chest, trying to make him let go, "then let me help—"

"What the fuck are *you* going to do to help him, Tommy?" Punz snaps, shaking him roughly until Tommy is forced to stop struggling, shoulders straining from his arm being jostled like a ragdoll.

Dream has proceeded to wrap the chain around Wilbur's other wrist, holding them in front of him. He has a knife. "You have *eight tries* to fix your mistake, Tommy. You've already made one."

“Dream, wait *waitwaitwait stop*—” Wilbur pleads, flat on his back, Dream’s knee digging into his chest, keeping him pinned down, nonetheless trying to pull away.

“Yeah, y’know what, you’re right, Wilbur, you should get some say, right?” Dream pauses. For a moment Wilbur looks relieved. Tommy knows better. “Which finger first?”

“Dream, *please!* It’s not— It’s not *possible*, please, I tried! I can’t— I *can’t fucking do it*, you don’t need to do this!” Tommy once more tries to pull free and Punz has half a mind to let him go.

“Dream, if that’s true, what’s the point—”

“Shut up, Punz! You don’t know Tommy like *I* do and he is a fucking *liar*,” Dream points an accusing finger back at Tommy.

“I’m not! I— I’m *not!*” Tommy, upon realizing Dream’s intentions has crumbled even further into hysterics, hoarse and weak and tugging against Punz until the man’s hold will surely bruise. “*Dream! Please, just listen to me! I swear it! I swear it I swear it to— to every fucking god including you, alright?! It didn’t work!*”

Dream pauses, turning to look back at Tommy, laughing. “Really? *That’s* what you’re trying? That’s... well, pathetic and a little adorable, Tommy,” he puts a mocking hand over his heart. “Thank you for putting your faith in me.” He sighs, turning back to Wilbur pinned to the ground. “Sadly, I don’t have as much faith in *you*. And now Wilbur is gonna pay for it,” Dream’s left hand is still holding Wilbur’s hands aloft from the chain around his wrists. He twirls the knife through his own fingertips. “Wilbur, which one? Choose or I choose for you.”

Wilbur is at a loss for what to say. He doesn’t have any hope left to lose. What is he scared of? Pain? A loss of dexterity? He’s never going to see a fucking guitar again, not in this life at least, so what is there left to lose?

“Right— Right index. Just do it,” Wilbur shuts his eyes tightly. “Come on, get it over with! Just do it!” His voice breaks from a buried sob.

“No, *no, Wil!* Dream, hold on! Please, just—” Tommy tugs more viciously against Punz’s iron grip on his arm. “Why won’t you just fucking *listen to what I’m saying! It. Isn’t. Possible!*” Rage has joined desperation, he turns and makes like he’s going to try to punch Punz in the face, but Punz grabs his free hand and holds both of his wrists tightly, looking more irritable than disturbed.

“Tommy, give it a *rest*. You can’t stop this, and it’s not like he’s gonna kill him,” Punz hisses, resolutely refusing to look at Dream and Wilbur.

“I can’t stop this, but *you* can,” Tommy spits right back, his wrists held he now tries to kick Punz in the shins. “You *stupid fucking coward—!*”

Then Wilbur screams, and Tommy turns around sharply, “*Wilbur!*”

He's still trying to throw himself in their direction, but by then it's too late. Tommy wants to shut his eyes, to look away, but even if he dared, he cannot cover his ears against the horrible noises his brother is making, broken sobs and hysterics and that awful screaming briefly joined by the crack of bone, and then it fades only to whimpers and gasps for air. Dream lets go, and Wilbur curls inward, cradling his profusely bleeding hand close to his chest.

"Wil... Wil I'm sorry, I'm so fucking sorry, oh *god*—" Tommy's vision blurs from tears he cannot brush away. "I'm so fucking sorry, I—" his voice breaks, high and hoarse, as his anger dies as swiftly as it arrived.

Dream steps back and sighs, as if relieved, this act cathartic and calming, a clean slate. "Now, Tommy. I want *you* to try again. Here," Dream shoves an empty book in Tommy's direction. "You can let go, Punz. Tommy doesn't have a reason to struggle anymore."

Punz lets go.

Tommy stumbles forward, still having been trying to pull away. He stares at the offered book with exhausted loathing.

"Write it again, Tommy. Wilbur will probably bleed out from his hand by the time you're done, and we'll test it again," Dream presses it against his chest, letting go, and Tommy grabs it almost on autopilot. He doesn't want to write a fucking book, he wants to comfort his brother, still gasping and bleeding on the floor.

"I'll give you... two hours. You can do that, right? If not... well, maybe I won't take off a whole *finger* for that, but maybe a finger *nail*. Shouldn't be a problem, I don't think. You're pretty well practiced by now, huh?" Dream's anger has waned to horrible calm once more, bloodlust satiated, as he nods Punz out of the cell, the pair of them leaving Tommy with his task and his burden.

The cell door shuts and Tommy drops the book and runs to Wilbur's side. "Wil, Wil I'm sorry, oh *god*—" Tommy chokes back a sob. "I'm sorry, Wil, this is my fault—"

Wilbur shakes his head, unable to find the words, curled up tightly, bloody hand wrapped in his coat and held close.

"No, no, Wil, it *is*—" Tommy glances at the door, then at the thin crack in the wall for air. He doesn't trust Dream leaving. "I don't—" Tommy murmurs frantically. "I don't know what to *do*—"

"D-Don't give him what he wants," Wilbur says shakily, eyes shut tightly. "Sounds like you've already tried, and my vote—" he stops with a sharp inhale, the pain in his mangled hand pulsing. "M-My vote is you don't— You don't give him what he wants, alright?"

Tommy gives Wilbur a nod, grim and determined. He glances around the cell once more, leaning in closer, whispering, barely audible from here and still it feels like a risk, "I won't, Wil. I'm sorry I... I'm sorry I didn't try to save you. Sorry I couldn't... I couldn't *ask* first. I just... I'm sorry."

Wilbur processes this carefully, managing a bitter, half smirk. “T-That’s my right hand man... We—” for a moment his words are snatched away, he’d moved enough that the pain sharpened violently, he tries to continue somewhat steady, voice soft both from weakness and from caution. “We don’t let him win...”

Tommy, unable to stop himself, laughs, barking and sharp. “R-Right hand... *right hand* man...” He grimaces. He feels sick.

Wilbur smiles shakily. “I need you even more now, right?” He laughs too, but it sounds more like a whimper.

“Yeah.” Tommy wants to tell him what Punz had said, but telling Wilbur even that whisper of explanation was dangerous enough, adding on the potential risk of ruining their only escape route is too much for Tommy to tempt fate with right now. There is no way Dream could hear him whispering in Wilbur’s ear, but some part of Tommy still feels too vulnerable, that hint of old, deranged paranoia that Dream is always watching, always listening with some surveilling omnipotence, a *Panopticon* in a particularly diseased sense. Tommy glances back at the book, which lays in a shallow, diluted pool of both of their blood. “I’m sorry, Wil, but I gotta do this, now, so he—” Tommy’s voice trembles, he pauses. “So he doesn’t have an excuse, yeah?” He places a delicate hand on Wilbur’s shoulder. “A-And I suggest you try running your hand under cold water. Cold as you can get it. You’ll go numb eventually. Promise.”

Wilbur nods shakily. He doesn’t think he can move from his place on the floor. “Do what you have to.”

~

Punz’s own anger is far better contained than Dream’s. He thinks the man is a lunatic. They’ve clearly failed. The perfect path to immortality is impossible. Punz is now just quietly calculating the worth of the revive book, even if not only to him. That information is precious. He wonders if he could flee the server entirely, but there’s no guarantee it works outside of that god’s domain. That leaves him with only one path forward, the same path he’d already intended on following.

“You’re not as put out as I thought you’d be,” Dream says, washing the blood from his knife in the cauldron of bleach in the library. “At the very least *frustrated*. Are you that optimistic, Punz?”

“No, the opposite, actually,” Punz says dryly. “I think you’re wasting your time with this. Tommy seems pretty sure it’s impossible—”

“Yeah, well you don’t know him like I do!” Dream snaps, slamming the knife down. “He’s— He’s a liar, and stubborn and *always* trying to get in my way, but *Wilbur*; Wilbur is what breaks him. *Always*. So if I keep pushing, even if it *isn’t* possible, at least we’ll know for sure.”

Punz stares at him, Dream still just looks at him with that empty smile, but Punz thinks the mask is slipping in other ways. “And it’ll only cost... what, all of Wilbur’s fingers?”

“If it has to,” Dream is resolute and unaffected on a dime, but the facade is weak when Punz knows where that anger lies. “Why? What’s got you invested? What difference does it make?”

Punz shrugs. “It just feels final. Like you said, limbs don’t grow back.”

“And?”

“I don’t know. What if you need Wilbur more functional than that? What if you need *him* to write the revive book?”

Dream chuckles. “You know what I think, Punz?”

Punz shifts restlessly, arms folded over his chest, immediately on the defensive. “What?”

“You’re looking for an *excuse*. Just because it makes you squeamish,” Dream looks back at him, clearly smug. Punz says nothing. Dream continues. “Look, if you want to know what my other options were, I can oblige. Break his legs, make sure they heal wrong. Sew his lips shut, or cut out his tongue. Hm, what else,” Dream mulls it over. “Blinding him. That too. Are any of those *better* to you? Because trust me, a simple beating wouldn’t incentivize anything from Tommy. Hell, *he* beat the shit out of Wilbur himself. I am doing what *I* know will work.”

Punz’s first thought is to say *at least sewing his lips shut wouldn’t be permanent*, but he doesn’t think Dream will take that as friendly advice. He’s also somewhat smug to find that Dream’s scoldings about his moral compass don’t come with the same sting that they used to. Punz doesn’t expect reason from a man like this, so he puts no stake in his views.

“And... if immortality— at least, immortality this way— isn’t possible, you’ll still give me a revive book? That was the deal,” Punz is pushing it, he knows. He’s also realizing even if Dream gives him his own copy of the revive book, Punz still needs Tommy and even Wilbur. He doesn’t want to live like this, and the only way back into the good graces of the server is with Tommy and Wilbur by his side.

“Yeah, sure, we’ll get there,” Dream waves him off dismissively. “I mean, hey, this might not be possible, that doesn’t mean *immortality* isn’t possible.”

“Well, it clearly is, it’s just only possible with another person to bring you back,” Punz mutters.

“Yeah,” Dream huffs. “*Dependency*. It’s bullshit.”

That Punz can agree with wholeheartedly.

~

Wilbur has either passed out or died. Tommy honestly doesn’t want to check. The earlier hours, Tommy had sat beside his brother, leaning against his back, feeling the rise and fall of his chest, even as the pool of blood grew, occasionally going, “*alright, Wil?*” to be met with hazy and mumbled reply. Tommy had to hunch forward over the book eventually, and he

never settled back as he grew more and more sure that he would no longer feel his brother breathing. He's finished the book, spending the rest of his time here staring off into space, doing his best to fixate on nothing and not think about the future waiting for him. Wilbur is just behind him. He's stopped replying. Tommy doubts he's merely unconscious at this point, the pool of blood has grown too much, sticking to Tommy's feet, and that too he ignores.

He still flinches like an explosion has gone off when the cell door reopens, stumbling off the ground, peeling away from the blood that had been coagulating around him. Dream is all business again, extending a hand impatiently.

"Give it."

Tommy does.

Dream goes over to Wilbur's unmoving form, nudging him with his foot. He seemingly can't decide if Wilbur is dead or alive or not either. He settles the debate by stomping down on his neck until something cracks. Tommy flinches.

Wilbur returns with a gasp, looking down at his hands as if expecting something to have changed. At least the wound is healed over. His neck is stiff and sore. The past hours in Limbo have offered no calm for him either. He looks at Tommy. He doesn't have any comfort to offer, no matter how much he wants to at the sight of his little brother sitting back against the wall, so small and fragile and beyond his rescue.

Dream sighs, disappointed. "So, you did it right. If you *did* do it, that is."

"I- I did," Tommy stares at Dream, eyes wide, waiting with heavy horror.

"Sure," Dream says dryly. He turns on his heels, returning to Tommy, towering over him. "Or you've forgotten."

Tommy leans away, pressed against the wall, shoulders hunched inward as he tries to shrink inward, nails dragging on the stone bricks. "F-Forgotten?"

"Yeah, Tommy. Forgotten the *rules*, forgotten your place in all this?" Dream says mockingly.

"I don't--"

Tommy doesn't get the chance to finish. Dream's fist nails him in the temple, sending him reeling.

"Tommy!" Wilbur, still weak from his resurrection, stumbles forward, forgetting the chain around his wrist and ends up yanking himself back to the ground, the chain tugging him back and his boots slipping in his own blood.

Tommy doesn't get his bearings again, because the moment he goes down, Dream's boot shatters his ribs.

“D-Dream—” Tommy wheezes. He doesn’t know what sort of pleading he’s planning on, but he doesn’t know what else to do, vision blurred and every breath sending shards of pain through his chest.

“Why are you *talking*?” Dream grabs him by the hair, forcing him to sit up, to look him in the eye. “I didn’t tell you to *talk*.”

Tommy cries out as Dream’s hold tightens, scalp protesting painfully, but he listens, he doesn’t say another word, biting down on his cheek until that bleeds as well. His obedience is rewarded with him being thrown to the ground, Tommy curling into a ball to try and protect himself, head tucked down, covering his face with his hands, expecting another kick to break bone. He’s so tired of the taste of iron, of blood sticking to him, of pain.

“Don’t do that, Tommy. Put your hand out,” Dream crouches down beside him.

Tommy looks up at him; wary, loathing, terrified. He knows this is *almost* a test, but not quite. Dream doesn’t need to manufacture expressions of how broken down he’s become, but this is both to quell Dream’s frustrations and ensure that Tommy isn’t trying to lie to him.

“*Tommy*,” Dream grabs him by the ear as he hesitates too long, pulling his head off the ground, forcing Tommy to start to sit up, only to push his head back down into the stone, the pain radiating through his recently restored skull, not sharp enough to let him black out. “Hand. *Now*.”

Tommy’s hand trembles as he offers it forward, not bothering to try to sit up again. Dream takes it, and Tommy doesn’t resist, even as he sees exactly what Dream is doing. Dream doesn’t have his knife. Tommy knows he doesn’t need one to do some damage. Punz and Wilbur watch on in varying levels of dread.

“Let’s do a little... a little *refresh*, on something *very* important to us, Tommy,” Dream says coolly. He holds Tommy’s middle and ring finger in either hand. “When I say *jump*,” he pulls them away from each other. There reaches a point, a level of reaction without reason, where Wilbur and Tommy’s screams sound the same, hysterical and pushing past the point of sanity. Tommy screams until his voice breaks, so he almost doesn’t hear the rest of Dream’s query, but he knows what follows. “*You say?*” Dream stops the moment skin tears.

Wilbur wants to look away, but he can’t. If he cannot save his brother, he’ll at least bear witness. Still, he doesn’t dare speak, knowing Dream is far more likely to hurt Tommy to punish him than to even consider stopping, but he doesn’t understand. Dream says this with some greater understanding than Wilbur or Punz are privy to, so Wilbur can only watch on, helpless, doing his best not to gag at the sight of Tommy’s broken hand, even as the sound of bones and tendons ripped through rings in his mind.

Tommy struggles to breathe, eyes streaming, hand feeling half on fire and the pain spreading up his arm like a blade has been slid under his skin from the back of his hand up to his elbow, but he cannot refuse Dream’s question. His voice is hoarse and cracked and trembling, Wilbur and Punz almost don’t hear his reply, but he manages to speak, defeated, weak, and burying a sob: “*W-Where...*”

Dream lets go, dropping his hand like he's tossing aside garbage, any movement pulling another cry from Tommy's weary and compressed lungs. He stands once more, towering over Tommy's weakened body, curled inward and *so* small. Tommy doesn't even try to protect himself, eyes shut tightly, cradling his hand, whimpering sobs still escaping.

Dream continues, praising and belittling all at once, "good job, Tommy. I think you got the message. Hopefully I won't have to teach you that lesson again, right? Now go on. *Jump.*" One last kick to the skull, and once more Tommy is dead.

Now Wilbur gags. He leans over the sink, dry-heaving.

"Oh, keep it together, Wilbur," Dream sneers. "It'll *heal*. Not like it's any worse than what *your* hand looked like. Come on, Punz. I say we give him the rest of the day."

Once more, Wilbur is alone with his little brother's body.

There had been a time where the thought of seeing the other hurt had warranted foolish and desperate lengths, Wilbur attacking Dream, *many* times, but particularly trying to hold him down so he wouldn't cut Tommy's thumb off... however long ago that was. He has no idea how long it's been. That had been desperate and maybe a bit stupid, sending Tommy running when help was on the way, but he couldn't stand by. He just couldn't. Regardless, that has changed. Like he and Tommy had come to some unspoken agreement, they can hurt each other, *allow* each other to be hurt, all to serve a higher cause. Dream doesn't get *shit*. Wilbur hadn't felt a shred of resentment for Tommy whispering a confession, of letting him get his finger cut off. And when Dream brings him back again, Tommy will, ideally, stick to it, plead and lie and *swear* that he tried, all while Dream cuts off another finger. Wilbur is okay with that. Somehow the thought is more palatable than Tommy offering a desperate confession to Dream, to playing right into his hands.

Doesn't mean it doesn't fucking *suck*, though.

"In Limbo... you don't get those back..." Wilbur mutters, this time not to Tommy's corpse which he is doing his best to ignore, merely to himself. "That's the only place you'd probably ever get to play a guitar again... and when is Dream going to let you and Tommy be together long enough for you to figure out how to play again anyway?" Wilbur scoffs. He washes the blood off his hands and tries to bury the unnatural emptiness that is now symmetrical for his left and right hand. He and Tommy are no longer matching. *Dream said eight more tries. He's willing to take all of them.* Wilbur stares down at his hands, turning them over, already damaged and foreign, and he briefly considers the immobility and potential torment that loss will offer. He shudders, burying his hands in his pockets. "That motherfucker might as well take an arm off..." He leaves the sink, sitting against the wall Tommy has died against, trying to angle himself so he doesn't have to see him. He holds his resolve for a few minutes, hands in tight fists in his pockets, before he takes them back out, fingers moving rapidly and fluidly at his direction. He still has his calluses from the guitar.

Wilbur crumbles, tears and hiccuping sobs that almost feel childish in the weight of it all, but he doesn't want to lose any more of himself. He still doesn't want Tommy to stop, to give up, but he will mourn the cruelty and the loss.

~

Tommy has to at least allow himself some pride at his conviction. He's sat there in Limbo for hours. And then days. Didn't even write the book or summon one at all. Because if he'd managed to resurrect himself, there would be no hiding that from Dream. And if Dream loses the one thing he needs other people for...

Well, good or bad it's not like they have much to lose. And it's not like he was ever going to let them go. If anything this makes the revive book near useless to Dream other than for his usual derangement, because he cannot and will not rely on other people. So if this whole mess ending could ever be a good thing for them, it's basically over either way. At least this way, Dream doesn't get what he wants.

Tommy *does* feel bad for Wilbur, though. For what he is, in essence, doing to him.

He knows what Wilbur would say. *"You're not the one doing this to me, man, it's Dream. It's fucking Dream's fault, so don't put that on yourself."*

Tommy is aware. He's also aware that he is the only one who might actually do something to help Wilbur, and he won't. For all he knows the book really doesn't work from this side of things. It's a selfish thought, an excuse. Tommy isn't *trying*.

He doesn't break, though. No matter how many days he remains trapped here, because the thought of Dream's smug fucking voice, lording it over them, maybe hurting Wilbur anyway just because he can, he fucking refuses.

It's strange how having a tangible goal makes things easier. This is something he can do, not without consequences, but at least it's *something*. Wilbur has given his blessing, so Tommy will continue to wait.

Maybe he'll listen to a disc, if he can get ahold of one. And he won't think about the future he's outlined for his brother, blessing or no blessing. He won't think about how certain he is that given the chance, Dream would tear Wilbur to pieces if it meant he'd get his way. Some part of him thinks Dream *must* be all knowing, that eerie conviction the man has that Tommy has to be lying.

Tommy will dig his heels in, at least for the foreseeable future.

That future is far more immediate than he might have thought, days slipping by.

"Wake up."

Tommy refocuses on Dream and Wilbur. Punz is absent. Tommy struggles to sit up. He doesn't know what entitlement he has to his dread. Wilbur is the one doomed.

"Hey, Tommy. Notice something? Maybe a certain *lack of effort* on your part?" Dream leers over him, mocking and cruel.

Tommy, briefly, wildly, has the thought that Wilbur has snitched to save his own skin, but from the terror on his brother's face, the way his hands remain clasped protectively close, he

knows he hasn't.

"Not..." Tommy pauses, his mouth very dry, head still pounding. "Not lack of... lack of fuckin' effort..."

"Hm," Dream still indicates doubt. "Wilbur? Are you gonna fight me on this, or should we just get it over with?"

Tommy stumbles to his feet, defeated and weary. Dream turns back to him, prepared for a fight, prepared to throw Tommy aside if he should get in the way, but Tommy doesn't. He *does* go to Wilbur, though. He sits beside him on the edge of the bed and reaches out.

"I'll... I'll hold your hand for it," he murmurs. "Can't do anything else, so, thought I'd... yeah."

Wilbur nods mutely. He takes Tommy's hand.

Dream laughs, almost disbelieving. "Wow. *Really?* That's it? No *pleading*, no trying to... to *hit* me or whatever?"

Tommy allows his hatred to stir and settle, calm a far more effective defiance than rage. "There's *nothing* I can fucking do to change this, and you're not planning on stopping, so— so at least let me do this, alright?"

"Huh," Dream scoffs, clearly still skeptical. He gets out his knife, coming up beside the two of them. "Wilbur, which one?"

Wilbur's left hand trembles as he offers it, turning and burying his face in Tommy's shoulder, for once willingly let Tommy look after him. "Just... just take the next one, just— oh, *god*—" He stifles another sob, holding onto Tommy's hand more tightly.

Dream grabs his wrist, knife ready and poised. Tommy cannot see his face, but he knows Dream is watching him, watching as he brings the blade closer.

"I'm sorry, Wil," Tommy shuts his eyes as well.

"Holy *shit*," Dream says, and Wilbur does not scream, instead he looks up, staring in confusion at his hand, no longer in Dream's hold.

"W-What're you..?" Wilbur says weakly.

Dream steps back. "You're..." he sounds disappointed, "you're serious."

"What?" Tommy frowns, eyebrows furrowed together.

"You're not even putting up a *fight*, you're gonna *let me*. I mean you... you *actually* don't think there's a chance."

"A... a *chance*?" Tommy stares at him, eyes narrowed.

“The book. It didn’t work.”

Tommy scowls. “Yeah, that’s what I fucking *said*—”

“Yeah, but you’re a lying brat, so, allow me some doubt,” Dream says dryly. “But you’re... I was gonna destroy Wilbur’s hands.”

“*Was?*” Tommy sits up, briefly, wildly feeling something like hope.

“Yeah, I mean,” Dream shrugs. “It would be a waste to do it now if there’s not a *reason* for it. I’m gonna save them for when I need you to do something *else*, obviously. Something you can *actually* do.”

“Oh, thank *fuck*—” Wilbur falls back onto the bed, burying his face into his somewhat-whole hands.

“Really? You’re— *Really?*” Tommy stares at him, disbelieving.

“Yeah,” Dream laughs. “Call me a monster or a... a *psychopath*, or whatever, if you want, but let’s be clear,” he twirls the knife through his fingertips. “I’m not *wasteful*.”

“Right... wasteful...” Tommy says, still somewhat in a daze, like the relief won’t quite hit him.

“Well, I won’t say I’m not disappointed, or frustrated, but I am *much* less likely to fucking crush you for being weak or... or unable to do the impossible than if you were a lying fucking rat,” Dream jabs a warning finger against Tommy’s chest. “Now, come on,” he heads toward the doorway.

“W-What?”

“Tommy, come here,” Dream snaps his fingers and points just behind him, calling a dog. “You’re not gonna *stay* here. What purpose would that serve?”

“Oh— Um, right,” Tommy stands, but he hasn’t let go of Wilbur’s hand, and Wilbur hasn’t let go of his. He hesitates. “Wil, I...”

Wilbur looks up at him, eyes watering, relief and maybe a hint of pride. He pulls away first. “A-All good, Tommy. It’s—” Wilbur doesn’t know what to say, certainly not *it’s fine*, but there’s not much else. “Yeah.”

Tommy smiles halfheartedly. “Yeah.”

“*Tommy.*”

“I’m *coming*, I’m coming,” Tommy grumbles, following after Dream. Dream raises a hand as if to hit him, for talking back, for being too slow, but Tommy doesn’t flinch, just looks at him expectantly, so Dream doesn’t hit him, taking him by the arm instead and dragging him back to his own cell.

“This isn’t a *victory*, Tommy. You still failed me. And just because that didn’t work, don’t think this is over,” he throws him forward, Tommy hitting the stone bricks hard, scraping his palms. Tommy doesn’t look at him, he just nods. Dream leaves him, and the door shuts with the click of redstone.

Tommy staggers to his feet, glancing warily back at the shut cell door before turning to the back corner of the room. “...Wil?” He calls carefully through the wall.

“Tommy?” A muffled but coherent reply.

“How’s... how’re your digits?”

“Um, swell, really. All eight of ‘em.”

Tommy laughs, sharp and barking, and Wilbur falls into his high cackle, and that’s all it takes for both of them to crumble into hysterics, relief and unused adrenaline the perfect cocktail for giddiness, however mad.

“*Wooo*,” Wilbur sighs once he can catch his breath. “That was...”

“Ohh, that was– that was real *shit*,” Tommy agrees.

“Yeah, that was–” another giggle from Wilbur. “What a cunt.”

Tommy laughs again, wheezing and breathless. “You know what I’m thinking about?”

“What?”

Tommy gets as close as he can to the wall, speaking more softly. “Can you still hear?”

“Yeah, yeah pretty much.”

In half a whisper, grinning, Tommy doesn’t care how dangerous it is, how can he *not*?
“*Yooooo–*”

Wilbur catches on halfway through, joining in a viciously joyful and hushed tone, “*suck it, green boy!*”

They devolve into giggles again, mere feet apart, a wall of stone between them, but at the very least, they know they aren’t alone.

Chapter End Notes

this got. more violent than I intended. and more sweet at the end. idk. we're approaching The End. A few more chapters.

Wahoo.

Chapter 33

Chapter Notes

CW: graphic depictions of violence, repeated character death, hunting humans for sport, claustrophobia, drowning, vomiting

Long time no see!! I am back with almost 13,000 words of violence ^-^

(although forgive me for not doing much editing, I wanted to get this posted!!)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

They all wait for rain.

Every time Punz returns from the outside world, Tommy looks at him, hoping that it's time, but Punz just looks away. Tommy has convinced himself Punz will indicate, will hold his eye contact, when it finally *does* rain, but until that point he has no idea. Dream too is waiting for rain. After their previous failures, the man of endless torment has apparently run out of steam. He has regressed from the practical applications of his experiments and returned to research. That at least is what it seems like he is doing. He's spending most of his time in the library now. Tommy doesn't know if this is really the case, it could be out of date information, offered by Punz offhandedly when they were alone and Tommy questioned what the fuck the bastard was playing at.

That same brief meeting, Dream out in the world doing god knows what, Punz had also given him scraps of a plan.

"Next time we hunt you two down, you're gonna head toward the beach. Normally, you head deeper into the jungle, or that's where he tries to send you, but if you keep angling south, you'll hit sand. I will meet you there. I have a portal hidden nearby that gets onto the nether roof, once we get there, I cover up and break the portal. An explosion will be too loud, but I've got a plan to set up a little redstone that in a few ticks will shatter the portal once I go through, that way the hum won't give away where it is."

Tommy had listened intently. He is still scared to hope, but nonetheless it feels vital that he listen and try. "Right. I... I haven't been able to tell Wilbur yet, but I'll drag him along with me."

Punz nods, dismissive. He doesn't care if Wilbur keeps up or not. "I want you to try to have a revive book on you. Write one in the books you have here, keep it in your inventory." Punz frowns. "You can still access your inventory, right?"

Tommy mulls it over. "...yes? I dunno, I haven't had much to carry lately," he says sarcastically. "I'm pretty sure I don't need my comm to open it. Worst case scenario I'd

shove a book up my shirt. But wait, actually—" Tommy shakes his head sharply. "I'm not doing that."

Punz steps forward, something dangerous in his tone. "Excuse me?"

Tommy scowls, unfazed. "If you have me just carrying a book with me, what's to stop you from just killing me and taking it? Especially if I can't put the flame potion on the spine."

Punz tries to think of a counter argument. He can't.

"Look, what if..." Tommy carefully considers his options. "If you send coordinates to Tubbo, I'll take a book with me."

"Yeah, not happening."

"Same bullshit circle we talked around last time," Tommy folds his arms over his chest, stubborn to the last.

Punz gives him a look. "Fine. Just— Keep your head down until it rains, alright?"

It was at least something to hope for, a plan in place. Tommy still can't quite believe he still has something to hope for in all of this. Dream has been far too quiet lately, occupied with his research or some other evil plotting. Maybe it should feel like a relief, but Tommy cannot make his peace with it. The waiting game is always the hardest part. Tommy doesn't know how long this lull has lasted. At least a few days. Maybe longer.

It gives them time to talk, so some things can be resolved. It's not like they can make much progress down here, but it makes what they can do feel more important.

"Wil?" Tommy calls through the wall. He's hungry, and his efforts to distract himself had spiraled into a more dreadful state. It's been haunting him for more than days, but maybe now the monotony has gotten to him enough he'll voice it aloud.

"Mhm?" Wilbur's voice is groggy. He must be feeling the hunger too. It's been a few days since anyone has bothered to feed them.

"I know we're... we're sort of squared away and shit, and it's been a while now, but... are you pissed off with me? For what I did before?" Tommy's hands fidget restlessly in his lap, tugging at the frayed edges of his shirt, tying the loose thread into knots. He tries not to get caught up in the sight of his own hands. They've grown more skeletal, new scars forming from him tearing apart his nails again when he clawed out of a grave. He still doesn't recognize his own body.

"What you... What you did?" Wilbur tries to focus up, puzzled.

Tommy's thoughts had had too much time to wander and he returns to a pain best left in the past, but he can't stop thinking about it, and Wilbur is *here*, how can he not try? "I hurt you. I..." Tommy swallows thickly. He's grateful they've at least had access to water. "I killed you, Wil."

Wilbur actually *laughs*. “You *what?*”

“What the fuck are you laughing about?!” Tommy stands on unsteady legs, turning to face the wall, once more irritated that he cannot shout in his brother’s face, that he cannot look him in the eye while he tries to understand.

“You’re serious,” Wilbur sobers. “Wait— You said something like this. It was when we were dead for a minute, you said you were *sorry* you killed me. I don’t get it.”

“What, succumbing to your injuries doesn’t count as me killing you, *hm?* Is that it?!” Tommy groans irritably, pacing. “Why d’you make it so hard for you to be mad at me?!”

“Tommy, *you* didn’t kill me. You... you beat me bloody, I’ll give you that, but *Punz* killed me. Not you.”

Tommy stops. “Oh.” He’s almost *more* pissed off now. Guilt had been eating him alive and dead since he’d heard. Well, actually, Tommy hadn’t given it that much thought while still buried in a grave, he had other more pressing concerns at that point, but otherwise. “Punz said...”

“I mean, to be fair, I asked him to. Dunno how much better that makes it, but, y’know.” Wilbur sighs. “All this time, you thought *you* were the one that killed me?”

“Er, yeah. That’s what Punz and Dream said.”

“Well, psh,” Wilbur scoffs. “Don’t wanna listen to those rat bastards, now, do you?”

Tommy laughs. He wants to tell him. He wants to tell Wilbur that cogs are still turning, hope is not quite yet dead, or if it is, Tommy knows how to revive it now. Punz is going to help them. Even thinking about it feels like a dangerous thing, let alone voicing it aloud.

“And... even if you had, Tommy. You would’ve been right to. You *were* right to have a go at me like that. You were... you were *defending yourself* from me. You cannot feel guilty for something like that,” Wilbur is once more softer, more imploring with just a hint of his classic self loathing.

“Shut it. I don’t want to hear that shit from you. Dream threatened you, he made you act like that. And now I’m not gonna hold it against you,” Tommy snaps.

A pause, Wilbur not replying.

“Wil?” Tommy still hates silences.

“You still flinch,” Wilbur’s voice tremors as he forces himself to speak up. “At me. When I step up close to you too fast.”

“When have you had fuckin’ time to get near me, dumbass? We’re in different cells,” Tommy scowls.

“A few times. When I... when I tried to step in front of you when Dream was ranting about you reviving yourself or whatever. I dunno, I can’t nit-pick every time, alright? It just happens,” Wilbur grows sharper, his resentment not meant for Tommy.

“Yeah, but... I flinch at *everything* nowadays. You’re not *special*,” Tommy tries to defend himself, but he already knows what Wilbur’s reply will be.

“You didn’t used to.”

Tommy doesn’t have any more argument to give. “I didn’t used to do a lot of things,” he says gloomily, sitting down heavily on the edge of his bed. A weighted pause. “What d’you think he’s gonna do to us next?”

“What?”

“You heard me. He’s not given up on the immortality biz, but for now... it’s been too... too peaceful. Y’know?”

“*Peaceful*? Getting shoved in storage and left to starve to death– that’s *peaceful*?”

“You *know* it is, Wil.”

A pause, then, grudgingly. “Yeah, I guess.”

“Sorry. Bet it reminds you of... of Limbo. Mine was bigger, but yours was just a room, so. Other than the hunger, not too different, is it?”

Wilbur had done his best not to think about it, but Tommy isn’t wrong. “Yeah.”

There wasn’t much for them to do besides wait. Having each other for company only goes so far when you’re divided by a stone wall.

“I spy something... yellow.”

“Glowstone.”

“Fuck you, that’s...” Tommy grumbles.

“I spy something gray.”

“Bricks.”

“Nope.”

“Not the bricks?!” Tommy huffs, glaring at the wall behind him.

“Nope!”

Tommy mulls it over. “Sink?”

“Bingo.”

“Ha,” Tommy settles back against the wall, thinking. “I spy something... red.”

“Don’t say blood.”

“No, not this time. And it’s dried-ish, so it’s basically brown now, so not that.”

“Oh, the blanket.”

“Yeah!”

“I spy...” Wilbur trails off. “Something green.”

“*Green?*” Tommy stares quizzically around his own cell. “What the fuck could be *green?*”

“I dunno. Take a gander.”

“You got some green-ish bruises?”

“Nope. Well, probably, but it’s not that.”

“The... you got like, slimy water in your sink or some fuckin’ thing?”

“Close. Not quite.”

Tommy stares around the room. “Moss! The mossy slimy gunky shit growing between the bricks.”

“There we go. Not bad, Tommy.”

“Ha! You’re fuckin’ right not bad!” Tommy smirks, proud of himself. “Right, then. I spy—”

Tommy’s stomach drops as he falls through space and into darkness, collapsing on top of a trap door.

“W-What the fuck is—”

“Quiet, we have to be fast,” Punz hisses.

Tommy finally computes. He’s in the stasis room.

Punz shuts the trap door for Wilbur’s stasis. Wilbur yelps as he collapses onto the ground.

“Tommy?!” Wilbur turns around wildly looking for him. “Oh thank god, you just—”

“Both of you shut up. We don’t have *any* time, I have no idea when Dream will be back. Come on, back in your cells,” Punz nods the two of them into the hall. Tommy scrambles to his feet, grabbing Wilbur by the arm and dragging him along with him.

“Tommy, what’s happening?!” Wilbur asks.

“Punz— So, Dream isn’t here?” Tommy asks.

“Yeah, but I *have no idea for how long*, so go!” Punz grabs Tommy’s arm shoving him into the cell before doing the same with Wilbur.

“What the fuck is going on?!” Wilbur shouts at him.

“It’s raining,” Punz says flatly, before shutting him in.

“What the fuck does that mean?!” Wilbur blusters.

“Wil! Listen to me, because like the man said, *no fuckin’ time*. We are trying to escape. Raining means getting hunted, and when that happens, we go South, toward the beach. First our usual way, then once we’re out of sight, to the beach. Punz is gonna meet us there, and then... well, hopefully we make it that far.”

Wilbur is briefly stunned into silence. “How fucking long have you—”

“Shush! No time for that, Dream could be back any time now and I am not gonna risk fucking this up now,” Tommy’s heart is racing. Finally, somehow, it feels real. Punz had broken the stasis chambers. Dream no longer had them on a tether. If they ran, if they ran and actually made it, that was *it*. Dream couldn’t take them back. Never mind that he and Wilbur had never made it far enough that Dream had been forced to stasis them back, he knows the odds are just as against them as they’ve always been save Punz maybe sticking his neck out, Tommy is no longer bound to Dream. He looks down at the metal welded around his wrist. Well, he’s no longer bound as tightly.

He paces, knowing he’ll seem agitated when Dream arrives but he doubts the man will question it. He’s seemed as stir crazy as they have lately. He wishes he’d asked Punz about his plan for dealing with the lodestone, but he knows there wasn’t enough time. Not to mention, Punz probably has no idea save chopping his hand off. Maybe the plan is to just outrun him enough it won’t matter.

Tommy had been expecting it, but he still jumps when the door opens. Dream enters, axe swinging lazily at his side. He doesn’t say anything at first. As always his lack of a face makes it far more unnerving.

“What do you want?” Tommy asks sharply.

Dream stops swinging the axe, assessing the blade, all theatrics and gruesome gravitas. “It’s raining, Tommy.”

Tommy takes a step back. He knows what happens next and there’s no promise that he’ll be quick about it. “Oh.”

“See you soon,” Dream says cheerfully. He raises the axe. Tommy shuts his eyes and there is a brief moment of sharp, white-hot pain through his skull, and he is once more falling through dark space.

“Tommy!” Wilbur is already there, waiting for him, looking pale and nervous. “So— So you and Punz have had a fucking escape plan?! How long has that been on the table?!”

Tommy steadies, stumbling into Wilbur's Limbo with an ease grown only from brutal determination. He takes a deep, unnecessary breath. "A few weeks. Maybe longer. You know, time gets funny for us," he shrugs. "I couldn't risk telling you, man. I'm sorry but I couldn't be sure Dream wouldn't hear it."

Wilbur grudgingly concedes. "Okay, *fine*, I can still hate it."

"Okay you big baby," Tommy scoffs. "Think whatever you want in that thick skull of yours, you've just got to be ready to fuckin' book it, you hear me? If Dream orders us to run in different directions, do it but make sure you circle back to the beach. And if you don't know where the beach is..." Tommy trails off, dark thoughts rising too easily. "I guess fuckin' run in general and hope you find your way out." Tommy grins. "He can't pull you back anymore. This is—" Tommy feels a strange, foreign rush of energy rising inside of him, he steps forward, grabbing Wilbur by the shoulders. "This is *it*, Wil. This is the moment." That feeling isn't entirely unfamiliar, just old. He's *hopeful*. He feels like maybe they actually have a chance.

Wilbur stares at him, worried, weary, and maybe doubtful. Tommy doesn't care. He'll drag Wilbur out of this too. Whatever miserable reply Wilbur was going to offer Tommy never receives.

"*Wake up.*"

Tommy gasps awake on the jungle floor, rain hitting his face, the sky overcast, the world dim. It's either dawn or dusk. Tommy doesn't know if he should hope for darkness. He squints up at that mask leering over him, scrambling back, struggling to stand. He sees Wilbur dazed and laid out in the underbrush next to him and grabs him, pulling him to his feet as well. Tommy has to act normal. He has to act resigned and weary; he cannot let his hopes bleed through.

"Same rules?" Tommy asks.

"Thirty seconds." Dream nods.

"Are we allowed to go the same way?"

Dream shrugs. "Sure, why not. Thirty seconds has started, by the way."

Punz scoffs next to him. Dream turns, surprised. "Thirty seconds. That's too easy. I mean, come on. Make it a minute so it's not totally boring."

"I mean, if we catch them too fast, we can always go again," Dream points out. *Fuck*. He turns back to Tommy. "Um, *go*. I told you I started counting, idiot."

Tommy has wasted precious seconds. He grabs Wilbur and picks a direction. He doesn't know where in the jungle he is, but he knows a few landmarks. He's hoping he stumbles into one, if he doesn't, he'd have to climb a tree and look for water, something they *definitely* don't have the time for. Wilbur doesn't complain, and he's less of a tug of dead weight to Tommy. Other than his wheezing breaths, he seems to almost keep pace.

“Oh, Tommy!”

“Shit *shit shit shit*–” Tommy mumbles breathlessly. They aren’t far enough. If he tries to head for the beaches now, Dream will just pursue them. He has an idea. It’s not a very good one. “Oh, fuck it–” He ducks behind a tree, pulling Wilbur with him.

“Why– What’re you–” Wilbur cannot breathe enough to talk, but his question is implied. They clearly are no longer running to the beaches.

“We need to lose,” Tommy hisses. “He’ll make us go again– probably, fucking hopefully, oh fuck, I dunno– but then we’ll have more time. I wasted too much of it, he’s too close–”

“Tommy! Hiding isn’t very brave, you know,” Dream jeers.

Wilbur nods, eyes wide and pale, unable to reply audibly now.

Don’t be too dumb though for fucks sake. Don’t make it obvious. Tommy pleads silently with his stupid big brother, grateful when he falls in line and presses himself against the tree beside him.

“You’re not as good at hide and seek as you were before, Tommy,” Dream’s voice sends terror rippling through him and he’s bolting before Dream can get through the second word.

Tommy can hear Wilbur behind him, and then he can’t. There’s the whistle of a bolt and a thud when Wilbur hits the ground.

“Wil!” Tommy stops. This is the only time Dream wouldn’t question him basically throwing himself onto the chopping block, so he stops dead in his tracks and turns to drag his brother along with him. He still feels revulsion when he sees that Wilbur is beyond saving, a bolt through his skull, but he tries to grab Wilbur anyway, jumping back with a yelp when Dream swings his axe down between them.

“No, Tommy,” Dream scolds him. “I get to keep him, *I* killed him! I thought you learned to stop being a little thief.”

Tommy is more than willing to fall into his instinct and try to keep running. He hardly gets the chance, instead, he feels a sharp pain in his back, Dream’s axe perfectly hitting his spine, vertebrae crushed and tissue brutally split apart. It’ll be over soon.

“I think you were right, Punz, that was *lame*,” Dream sighs. Tommy hears him vaguely, but he’s more distracted by the way the pain is spreading and then going numb with rapid speed. Then, there is nothing.

Tommy doesn’t even have time to look for Wilbur. Dream wants to get a move on.

“Wake up.”

Yet again Tommy is staring up at a dark sky and dense trees.

“Alright,” Dream kicks him lazily. “This time you and Wilbur are going different ways, got it? One minute. Go. Try not to be boring this time.”

Tommy staggers to his feet, but he doesn’t run yet. He’d finally gotten his minute, and he’s hesitating. He stares at Wilbur. He prays his brother will be able to find the beach on his own. There’s nothing else he can do. Tommy buries his dread, forcing himself to focus on being in a living body, on the world around him, on the beautiful, *incredibly* lucky fact that he has a vague idea of where they are. If he goes maybe 50 meters forward, he’d hit a trap. Instead, he gives his brother a remorseful glance and takes off running a bit to the right. It is not the direction of the beach, but it’s not directly *away* from the beach either, and in 20 seconds once he’s out of Dream’s sight, he’s going to turn. It has gotten dark out, the sun had been setting instead of rising, and Tommy is for once grateful that so much of his time has been spent in dark tunnels. He can make out enough shapes to keep going and stay functional. He knows any minute now mobs will start appearing and that is the last complication he needs.

Tommy miscalculated.

He knew there was a trap up ahead, but he was a little off. Tommy yelps as a rope snares around his leg and yanks him into the air.

“F-Fuck—” He gasps, disoriented and dizzy. This was *not* the time to make a mistake. Tommy knows Dream will soon be close behind. He flails uselessly, panic tight in his stomach. “Come on, come on big man, focus up!” Tommy slaps his own cheeks and holds still until he can see again. Even then, it’s disorienting as hell. Normally the thick growth and hanging vines made running through the jungle far more challenging, but Tommy has never felt more grateful. He fumbles to grab the nearest vine. It breaks in his hand. “Come on!” Tommy does his best not to scream his frustrations, reaching for another, pulling on it just until he gets close enough to grab another sturdier one. His ankle protests painfully as the rope tightens further, cutting off circulation and leaving him numb. Tommy ignores it, desperately trying to climb up to the branch the rope has him hanging from. “Oh thank fuck,” Tommy mumbles when he finally reaches the tie off point on the trunk. It isn’t tightly knotted, designed to release with a quick tug.

Tommy isn’t thinking especially clearly, barely focusing enough in time to not scream when he finds himself rapidly falling back to the jungle floor. Tommy lies flat on his back for wasteful, foolish seconds, trying to breathe, head pounding.

“Oh, Tommy!”

Tommy jolts back to his feet, fumbling to untie his ankle before giving up, the knot had been tightened far too much by his struggling. His foot is entirely numb, but that’s a concern for later. He bundles up the rope in his fist, leaving enough slack for him to run but ideally not get caught on anything and starts running again. He doesn’t have a clue which way the beach is now, and he doesn’t have the fucking time to stop and reorient. It’s so dark out now too it feels hopeless, all he can do is keep running, just like every other game. Tommy buries a scream when he runs headfirst into a figure in the dark, the figure screams back with far less subtlety.

“*Wil?!* ” Tommy hisses.

“Tommy?!”

“No, Father Christmas— *Yes*, Tommy, you prick,” Tommy growls at his brother, grabbing his arm to get him moving again. “And nice job shouting, let every motherfucker in a mile radius know where we are!”

“Where’s— Where’s the beach?” Wilbur keeps pace.

“Good question!”

“So you’ve got no clue.”

“I didn’t— I didn’t say *that*, ” Tommy grumbles, spinning around, desperately scanning the treeline, water falling into his eyes and making it even harder to see. He’s getting colder now, the humidity still hangs in the air and makes it harder to breathe. “But, yeah, basically.”

“Shit,” Wilbur turns as well, but he’s as bad off as Tommy, probably worse considering the rain and condensation covering his glasses.

“But don’t just stand around, that’s not gonna get us anywhere!” Tommy pulls him again, ensuring they at least keep up a quick walk as he desperately tries to reorient himself, limp worsened by the rope around his ankle.

“Whoa, what’s that?” Wilbur notices and stops him.

“Nothing, got myself out of it, again, *keep moving—*”

“Hold on, let me help you get that off. Your foot is fucking *purple*, dude.”

“It’s— Oh, that’s fuckin’ gross,” Tommy whines, sitting down on a thick root irritably.
“Fine.”

Wilbur crouches down in front of him; missing two fingers, his hands shaking and fumbling and he has an even harder time than Tommy trying to loosen the knot. “We... we need something sharp.”

“Oh, great, I’ll just grab the fuckin’ knife Dream gave me for my birthday, why didn’t I think of that?”

“You sure have an attitude.”

“Wonder why.”

Wilbur laughs. “I’ve got something, actually,” Wilbur pulls on his coat, twisting back, and yanking an arrow from the fabric. “Punz missed,” he says smugly. “Which, I guess might’ve been on purpose, honestly,” he shrugs before hesitating over the tight knot.

“If you cut my ankle, who cares? At least I’ll have some blood flow,” Tommy says pointedly.

Wilbur nods, gearing himself up before beginning to saw through the rope. It's not easy, even if Wilbur were to fully abandon caution, which he isn't. "So, what's the plan, then, if we don't know where the beach is?" Wilbur asks.

Tommy feels sick. "I dunno. If we just lose again, Dream might take us back under ground. And... I mean, there's no reason for him to check on the stasis chambers any time soon, but..." Tommy cannot resist terrible thoughts, of failing now and never getting another chance. "We've gotta find that beach."

"And then what? Punz really didn't clue you in to anything more?"

"There's... there's a portal somewhere," Tommy hates how feeble it sounds. He *needs* for this plan to mean something.

"Right. *Somewhere*," Wilbur mutters, continuing to saw carefully. "Ah, *shit*, sorry," he winces when he accidentally nicks Tommy.

"Didn't feel it," Tommy grins crookedly. Wilbur grimaces.

"There," Wilbur sighs when finally the rope falls away.

"Oh, that is *so* much less shit," Tommy sighs in relief, rubbing his numbed foot as blood rushes back into it, the cut stinging is tiny compared to the awful staticky pain that causes. "Okay, break time over, let's get this shitshow on the road!"

Wilbur stands for just a moment before there's another bolt in his hand. It's not there by choice. "Oh, fucking shit!" Wilbur gasps, stumbling back, staring at his bloody hand.

Tommy jumps to his feet. "Wilbur!" He is forced to fall back when a sword cuts him off. He stumbles away, staring in mild surprise at Punz behind the blade.

Punz raises his eyebrows, something almost like an apologetic shrug with a bit more subtlety. His behavior is explained by Dream's appearance, his axe cutting into the tree inches from Tommy's head.

"I thought I told you boys to run *away* from each other!" Dream says scoldingly, yanking the axe back out.

"Yeah, we're—" Tommy stumbles back further. "We're gonna do that right now. Wil, fucking go!" Tommy squeezes between two narrowly tangled roots, knowing Dream won't be able to follow. It gives him a few seconds of running before there's a bolt in his shoulder. "Fuck!" Tommy tries to catch himself on a branch, but his foot is still numb and stinging and catches on another root, sending him to the ground. He looks back only to be blinded by Dream wielding a torch against the growing darkness, he adjusts in time to see Dream cutting through the growth, widening the gap so he can follow. Tommy tries to run again before he can follow, but he instead finds himself yanked back. Tommy screams as the wound in his shoulder is tugged on painfully. He looks over his shoulder to see a rope around the base of the bolt.

“That’s not fucking fair!” Tommy snaps, voice breaking as pain sears through his chest and down his arm. He doesn’t try to run again. He knows he also can’t yank the bolt out, as all it would do is thread the rope through the wound.

Dream laughs. “Yeah, sure is fun, though.”

“Fine!” Tommy concedes bitterly. “End it, then, you sick prick. Let’s just move on to the next one, then, ay?!”

“Maybe I’ll give you and your stupid brother a break. You’re both wildly under performing,” Dream sneers.

Tommy feels a jolt of panic. He cannot look like he’s thinking carefully, but *fuck* is he desperately searching for an idea. It’s an obvious one, but not necessarily a good one. *Goading* Dream had always been a rather painful game of Russian roulette. It’s not a matter of the cost, any amount of pain is worth this, rather whether or not it will work. “You’re *done*? Nah, no fucking way, dickhead. I’ve still got some runnin’ left in me. Or are you gonna be a bitch and throw in the towel early?” Tommy jeers.

Dream tilts his head, not immediately drawn to anger, which is somehow worse. “Really?” He asks with mild curiosity. “You *want* to keep going?”

Tommy calculates, then he speaks. “I don’t– I don’t fuckin’ know what I want. Maybe... maybe I wanna win? I dunno. Just– Just do what you want. Not like it matters.”

Dream takes a step forward. “No, no don’t go back on it, don’t half-ass it. You wanna go again?” Dream laughs. “Great! We totally can.” Tommy whimpers when Dream cuts the rope binding the bolt to the crossbow, pulling the arrowhead against the exit wound harshly. “Actually, Tommy, we’re gonna keep going, and *going*, and *going*, until you’re just *begging* me to stop. How does that sound?”

Tommy tries for some honesty, voice still ragged with pain. “F-Fucking perfect...”

“Good. I’m glad you think so,” Dream sounds far too delighted. He calls behind him. “Punz! Do you have Wilbur?”

Punz emerges from the brush dragging a body. “Yeah.”

Tommy stares at him, baffled, but Punz doesn’t glance in his direction.

“Cool, I’ll bring him back,” Dream rummages for a revive book, shoving the torch into Punz’s hands.

“You’re not...” Tommy trails off.

Dream turns back to him. “Yes, Tommy?”

“You haven’t killed me.”

“Great observation! Well done,” he mocks. “No, you’ve still got working legs. You’ll run like that.” He turns back to Wilbur.

Tommy doesn’t even feel scared by his predicament, merely frustrated, a hand going to his bloodied shoulder. He can run like this, maybe, but *escape*? He doubts it. He also has no fucking clue what Punz is playing at. Maybe he saw Tommy was caught and took out Wilbur to get things moving to the next round? Tommy doesn’t know if Punz is being cruel, smart, or both. Probably both.

“Wake up.”

Wilbur yelps, sitting up sharply, whirling around and giving Punz a look Tommy hopes Dream doesn’t recognize as betrayed.

“Welcome back, Wilbur! Tommy here has had the bright idea to keep the game going, even though it’s pitch black and cold and the fucking moron has a big hole in his shoulder! Hope that sounds fun to you,” Dream says cheerfully. “Alright, boys. 60 seconds. *Go.*”

“Fuck...” Tommy staggers to his feet, wincing, one hand going to his wounded shoulder, but he still has to try. Dream sounds gleefully committed to continuing this game all night, and he knows he needs to lose this one if he has any shot of continuing, but he cannot make it obvious.

“Tommy!” Wilbur runs after him.

“Wil, careful!” Tommy snaps.

“He... he didn’t say we had to go opposite ways, he didn’t try to stop me or anything,” Wilbur keeps up far more easily now that Tommy is wounded. “Fuck, that looks bad. Here, why don’t I...” Wilbur stares down at his bloody clothes before tearing a strip of fabric from his bloodied white button up. “Let me—”

“No,” Tommy pulls away. “Don’t fucking bother, if I bleed out and die it means I don’t have to keep running like this, alright? So just keep moving.”

Wilbur wilts, shoving the strip of cloth into one of his many empty pockets. His little brother has gotten harsher; even *meaner*. It’s not quite the wounded fury of when Tommy had hated him, and it’s not new necessarily, Wilbur had noticed it since coming here, but maybe he’d imagined it would get better now that Tommy knew the truth. He doesn’t know how he got so disillusioned. None of this is *better*.

“Can you... can you see anything?” Wilbur asks instead.

“A... A little,” Tommy frowns. “I’m pretty fuckin’ used to the dark, but Dream’s stupid torch has got my eyes going all funny.”

“Funny?”

“Like... I can still see it, y’know?” Tommy draws the fuzzy outline of the torch in the air.

“Oh, the after images. Yeah,” Wilbur nods. “I... sometimes I can see the tile. The tile cracks, I mean. From the train station. Just in the air, outlined like when you stare at glowstone too long before looking away.”

Tommy frowns. “But that’s not lights.”

“Er, no, I guess not,” Wilbur doesn’t know why he feels almost embarrassed by his Limbo’s after images. “Sticks around anyway, though.” Tommy grumbles wordlessly in reply, focusing on the terrain. Wilbur continues. “I can’t see fuck all. Not just from my glasses, you know, my Limbo is... bright as shit. It was kind of nice to be in the dark when I was first brought back.”

Tommy shudders, the movement agony on his shoulder. “Can’t fuckin’ relate...” he mutters.

Wilbur cringes. “Right, sorry, that was... not exactly tactful.”

“S’alright,” Tommy says offhandedly, all of his focus ahead. He thinks he knows where they are. They’re headed the opposite way to the beach, maybe, and there are at least a few traps in the area. Great. “Oi, watch your step.”

“Yeah, got it, doing the best I can,” Wilbur huffs, watching the ground as they walk. “We haven’t been running.”

“Eh?” Tommy glances at him.

“Just noticed that. We’ve been walking.”

“Well done. You can perceive walking. Good on you,” Tommy says dryly. “We’re not trying to actually get out of here this round, and we can’t stop trying like, totally, so, y’know,” he nods to the ground. “Taking it a bit slower is all.”

“And...” Wilbur stops himself. “Never mind.”

“What?”

“Nothing. Never mind.”

“Fuck off with that shit, go on, spit it out.”

Wilbur hesitates. “I was wondering... what if we keep going, round after round, and we don’t figure it out? We don’t make it to the beach?”

Tommy gives him a look, unimpressed. “You *know* what happens.”

“Do I?”

“We stay here with Dream. Or Punz tries again at some point.”

Wilbur sighs heavily. “Right...”

Tommy should've kept his focus ahead. He'd kept walking, looking back at Wilbur over his shoulder. As such, he's taken by surprise by the ground opening up beneath him.

"Tommy!" Wilbur runs forward, but the hole in the ground is shut. The only indicator of Tommy's location is a redstone lamp now glowing like a beacon in the now consuming darkness and a note block pulsing out a repetitive beat, both surely drawing in their hunters.

Muffled and anguished, Wilbur hears Tommy's reply. "*Wil!*"

"Tommy! Tommy, I'm here! I'm here," Wilbur falls to his knees, staring in helpless horror at the sealed ground beneath him. He fumbles in the dark, finding the broken tripwire. He gives it a tug, but it doesn't reopen. The noise and light is making it harder for him to focus.

"*Wil, I'm stuck! Get me out! I need to get out!*" Tommy is screaming like he's in pain.

"I'm sorry, fuck— I'm sorry, I'm trying!" Wilbur looks around frantically, scrambling over to the tree with the redstone lamp embedded in it, but all the redstone work is contained within the wood.

"*Help me!*" Tommy's voice breaking with sobs is audible through the earth. "*Please, I can't be stuck down here! I can't, oh my fucking god I c-can't get buried again I can't do this I can't fucking breathe it hurts it hurts it hurts it hurts it hurts it hurts it hurts—*" Tommy's babbling turns into all out hysteria.

"Fuck, Tommy, I'm here, I'm trying," Wilbur digs into the earth with his bare hands. It's tightly packed. Wilbur refocuses on the trip wire, finding both broken ends. By all odds this should work. He tugs on both ends, exactly as Tommy might have pulled on it when he walked into it, and the earth opens to reveal Tommy's pale, tear-streaked face staring up at him from a narrow pit, only to snap shut again. "Fuck!"

Wilbur had only been listening to Tommy. He hadn't been paying attention to his surroundings other than the trap laid in front of him.

He hears a *hiss* behind him, and then the snap of an explosion, and then nothing.

Tommy's terror had already been rising to a fever pitch, deranged panic and dread as he once more was buried, and even that terror is shattered into a different fear as the earth is ripped away and heat blasts against his skin. He's burnt and disoriented, but he manages to claw forward desperately through the hole opened up. He's conscious, and seemingly not badly injured.

"W-Where the fuck did you get ahold of TNT?! Do you just *ooze* the stuff since L'Manberg—?" He turns in a full circle to find his brother. He stops. A horrible pile of gore and shredded cloth was thrown forward and now dangles from where it got caught on the unbroken piston. Tommy gags. "That's bad. Oh, that's *so* fucking... that's *fucked—*" He begins to stumble and catches himself against a tree, dry heaving over the underbrush.

"Oh my god!" Dream cackles, running out of the darkness and nearly giving Tommy a heart attack. "Holy shit, there wasn't supposed to be an explosion over here! No fucking way, a

creeper got him?!” He turns to Tommy, delight obvious in the way he paces from foot to foot, twirling his axe in his fingers. “And *you* survived. Of course. Fucked up shoulder and all. Great. I’ll get Wilbur back in one piece, and you two can go again!”

Tommy stares at him blearily through the darkness and promptly collapses, his last conscious thought pleading for Dream’s cruelty to win out and for him to force them to keep going.

Dream’s cruelty has always been reliable.

Tommy must have died at some point, either succumbing to blood loss from his wounded shoulder or Dream killing him after he passed out, he gets a matter of seconds with Wilbur before he’s back in the jungle.

Tommy doesn’t know how much longer he can keep this up. Resurrection only restores so much stamina, and his exhaustion is beginning to run deeper, consuming in soul as well as body. Wilbur is still dead. Not for much longer. He tries not to look, but out of the corner of his eye he sees Wilbur’s mangled corpse stitch itself back together.

“You boys ready to go again?” Dream bounces back on his heels.

Wilbur and Tommy exchange a look, weary acceptance does not settle well alongside desperation. Tommy scans the treeline, a particular white hoodie missing from the darkness.

“Where’s Punz?”

“He’s sick of you two. Wanted to take a break.”

“Oh.”

“*I’m* not bored yet, don’t worry,” Dream reassures them. “We should’ve done this at night sooner! *Listen.*”

Dream falls silent and so do they, the sound of insects and parrots and other harmless wildlife is not alone. Night has set in, and Tommy can hear the distant hiss of spiders and a far closer groan of a zombie.

Dream hears it too, turning and bringing his axe down on the dead thing’s skull before it could take a bite out of Wilbur.

“Punz or no Punz.” Dream’s tone turns lilting and all the more disquieting. “*I’m* not the only thing hunting you two tonight!”

Tommy flinches back when an arrow hits the tree inches from his face.

Dream jeers, “looks like a skeleton has locked onto you, Tommy! I’m not helping you take care of this one, so how about you two get your shit together and get going?”

Tommy lies low, shrinking against the mud and vines as another arrow just barely misses its mark. He won’t be able to keep hiding from it, he needs to fucking *run*. Tommy grabs Wilbur, holding onto a fistful of his tattered jacket until Wilbur starts to follow. Wilbur’s coat

is still drenched in blood half diluted by the rain, it looks like the creeper did the most damage to his back and his skull from how the blood has matted his hair, his coat mostly in tatters now, but the sleeves are intact enough to keep it on him as Tommy pulls him forward.

They don't make it far.

Tommy feels Wilbur's sleeve tug out of his grasp, turning just in time to see a skeleton's arrow protruding from his skull. Tommy stops running, eyes blurred by tears as much as rain. He's just so *tired*. Some terrible, nagging thought has been growing louder and louder and he's so exhausted he almost *wants* it to be true.

What if there is no escape? What if Dream is in on it, and he's just had Punz set you up to keep struggling and running until you give up? You really think this is a way out? It's a sick fucking joke—

Tommy's thoughts are interrupted by pain; rotted, clumsy hands drag him back and closer to hungry groaning mouths. Tommy tries to hit the zombie away with his bony and weak fists. He doesn't want to die like this again, he's already been eaten alive once, but as Tommy loses his footing in the mud, dead weight follows and falls on top of him, teeth pierce his chest, and he is brutally reminded that as always, his wants don't matter. He doesn't scream, a low, desperate keening in the back of his throat, a pale, bloodied hand fumbles toward Wilbur's corpse before faltering. He cannot bring himself to struggle anymore. Tommy closes his eyes, and hopes something with sharper teeth will let him die quicker.

This time they're dead long enough to see each other.

"Hey, Tommy," Wilbur smiles weakly, leaning against one of the train station pillars.

"Ayup?" Tommy mumbles from his place lying on his back on the cool tile.

"Dunno about you, man, but I am rapidly losing my gumption," Wilbur sighs, eyes closed against the familiar glow of the artificial lights.

"Can't lose what you never had."

Wilbur exhales a laugh, not bothering to open his eyes. "Yeah, true."

That same bitter thought returns and festers in Tommy's chest. "Wil?"

"Hm?"

"What if... what if like, none of this is actually going down?"

Wilbur looks over at him, frowning. "What?"

"What if Punz lied? Like, what if this is just to... to make it funner for Dream or whatever."

Wilbur finds a way to look even more exhausted. "I dunno, Tommy. I guess it's like you said, we keep running until it stops. I mean, at this point if you begged Dream to let us stop, do you really think he would?"

Tommy stares gloomily up at the cracked ceiling. "...No," he mutters.

"How about this, next time, we try fighting?"

"*What?*" Tommy sits up, giving Wilbur an incredulous look. "*You*, Wil, are suggesting we try fighting?"

Wilbur shrugs. "Hey, man, I've tried to take a bite out of Dream more than a few times."

"And what's your success rate?"

"I'd say *success* is a bit hard to measure in this case—"

"Bullshit."

"Come on," Wilbur huffs. "I think we can be smart about this. If *we* circle back and try to get *behind* the bastard, we can jump him!"

"That's fucking adorable of you, Wilbur. What other wonders will your imagination conjure?"

"Look, it doesn't have to be elaborate, honestly I was thinking I could grab Dream, get him in a chokehold, and that should give you maybe a minute to make a run for the beaches, right? And... I'm at least a little self aware. The jungle is crawling with mobs at this point and I am *not* keeping pace with you. Whatever he does to me, you can... you can always bring me back! Right? So, *you* focus on getting to the beach, and I will do my absolute damndest to inconvenience Dream in the mean time."

Tommy gives him a skeptical look, disapproving. He concedes. "Fuck, fine, dunno why I bother trying to stop you from being an idiot."

"Part of my charm," Wilbur teases.

"You got the charm of a gutter rat. With rabies. And a rash."

"Thanks, man."

Tommy glances over to make another retort, only to find his brother absent.

"*Wake up.*"

Tommy does not bolt upright, he blinks water from his eyes and groggily returns to life. Wilbur is already sitting upright, looking about as good as Tommy feels. Wilbur gives him a knowing look, and Tommy realizes with weary acceptance that Wilbur's little plan was *not* a joke.

"You know, the mobs *do* make this a lot more fun, but sometimes they steal my thunder a bit," Dream says cheerfully. It must be well into the night by now, and Dream *has* been running all over the place as well, but he doesn't seem to tire at all. "Come on, Tommy! 60

seconds,” Dream snaps his fingers. “Unless, of course, you give up. Do you want to stop? Maybe if you beg, I’ll take you back.”

Tommy glares at him before grabbing onto a branch to help himself stand.

“Love that fighting spirit,” Dream says mockingly. “It’s cute that you two hold hands when you start running. You’re like sea otters,” he laughs. “Or the blind leading the blind, right?”

Tommy knows Dream is just trying to slow them down, get them to waste time, so he takes his brother’s hand and keeps trying to find his way through the dark.

This time Wilbur takes the lead, committed to his foolhardy scheme. Tommy is tired. He doesn’t care where Wilbur tries to drag them off to. He doesn’t know how to get to the beach from here, he doesn’t know where Punz is, and he’s starting to think none of it matters anyway.

Wilbur is quick. Dream has barely started meandering in the direction they had run off to and they’ve already circled back. One benefit of Dream wielding a torch while the two of them have been wandering in utter blackness is the man is a glowing beacon. There’s no way he can see them if they stay in the shadows. Wilbur squeezes Tommy’s hand before letting go, motioning for him to stop.

Tommy does, leaning against a tree, watching his brother with mild interest. Wilbur doesn’t duck back, he leans closer, watching carefully. If Dream weren’t so close, Tommy would’ve said *wait, you’re actually serious?*

But before he can consider any other alternative to communicate with him, Wilbur is following Dream, stepping out from behind their tree and dangerously close to being out in the open. Tommy scrambles to catch up. He still thinks Wilbur is being an idiot, but he might as well follow through. It’s strange to be creeping behind Dream. Tommy isn’t used to watching the man for anything but a threat. Dream walks like a predator, even when alone. His steps are too silent, his attention too steady. Tommy resists a shiver. He can’t pretend this plan doesn’t feel like something worth doing. It’s a strange feeling, something almost like power, to be the one following Dream instead. Tommy freezes, and so does Wilbur, not because Dream has once more become a threat, but rather there are the low groans of the dead far too close for comfort. Dream hears it too, turning his head sharply, following the sound.

Wilbur taps Tommy on the arm, leaning in close. “Look, I’m not planning on winning,” he whispers, words easily masked by the other noises throughout the jungle. “I think... maybe distracting him is the smarter thing for me to do, even if I can’t stop him.” He keeps a gentle hand on Tommy’s shoulder, an attempt at reassurance. “But... I’m pretty sure we’re close,” Wilbur points up.

Tommy looks. There’s a thin gap in the trees, the rain has slowed, clouds stirred by wind, enough that Tommy sees a bright star. Tommy feels a jolt of desperation, feverish hope clawing its way up even now. They can’t be sure, but Tommy is hoping that that’s the North star.

Meaning, he knows which way the beach is.

“Let’s just go, then,” Tommy whispers. “Come on, Wil, we should just get out before he notices—”

“He’s moving,” Wilbur mutters, walking past Tommy, continuing to keep the glow of Dream’s torch in their line of sight.

“Wil—” Tommy is planning on whispering another plea but finds himself otherwise occupied. “*Get back!*”

Tommy throws himself back just in time for that telltale *hiss*. Tommy feels earth crumble and fly past him, rocks cutting into his back, but he’s not dead. He looks back and sees Wilbur wide-eyed on the other side of a small crater.

“*Oh, Tommy!*” Dream heard it too.

“*Run!*” Tommy doesn’t waste any more time, giving his brother one last word of advice before he takes off through the trees. He knows where the beach is. *He knows where the beach is.*

That desperate hope is dampened slightly by the sharp pain of a bolt whirling past and cutting a gash across the side of his ribs, but Tommy can still run, one hand clutching his bleeding side and the other reaching forward, trying to clear the vines from cutting off his path. Tommy can only hope his brother is following, he doesn’t dare look back or pause. This is the best chance he’s had all night. Wilbur knows which way to go. They both ran for it. He’s begging everything *except* any god that that’s the case, that Punz will show and do as he’s promised somehow. Maybe Punz disappeared to separate from Dream without question. Tommy doesn’t care about the details, as long as the bastard shows. Right now his only goal is staying consistent in direction, clambering over roots, barreling through vines, letting himself occasionally get cut open by thorns, none of that matters as long as he keeps going. Tommy cannot deny the fact that other than his own frantic breathing and leaves whipping past his face, there is nothing else. Not Wilbur’s ragged breaths or heavy footsteps. He is alone. *He can still meet you. You can still do this.* Tommy feels his desperation grow into a clawing animal inside of his chest as he sees a split in the trees followed by dark water. Hitting the beach feels almost like flying, the liberation of no longer having to fight the jungle to take a step forward, but that elation fades as he stumbles further into the sand and hits surf. He stops, losing momentum after all that running sends him tumbling to the ground.

The salt water both burns and soothes his skin, the wet sand covering his knees. He takes a moment to try to breathe, the sting of his side deepens with each inhale. The humidity immediately is lessened by the ocean breeze and that relief is enough he could almost cry. He sinks deeper into the wet sand as he staggers back to his feet, wincing as the burning pain from the wound protests his movement. He stares around the beach, lit surprisingly well by an almost full moon, far better than the jungle at least. The clouds have cleared mostly, the rain slowing to a mist. He looks further down the beach, he turns and looks back up.

He is alone. Fear's grasp tightens. "They're coming... they're coming for you..." he murmurs hoarsely, still looking back and forth either way down the beach, waiting for someone, *anyone* to appear. He grabs his own wrist, trying to shift the metal band uselessly. Not *anyone*. Anyone but *him*.

Tommy jumps when a figure finally runs from the treeline, and there is a brief moment on a precipice where Tommy cannot make out who the figure is. They have a weapon. Tommy takes one step back before he recognizes the bright white of his hood.

"Oh, thank fuck, you— you got here," Tommy runs to meet him before stopping sharply. He scans the treeline behind him for Dream. "Are you a good bitch, or a bad bitch right now?" Punz looks unamused and maybe a tenth as haggard as Tommy feels. "Get it? Like... like witch? You lose your funny bone or some shit?"

Punz scowls. "Come on. Portal is buried further up the coast," Punz grabs his arm and begins to pull him through the sand. Tommy digs his heels in the best he can.

"No, you fucking dickhead, not without Wilbur," Tommy yanks free.

"Okay, well, if he's headed for the beach too, he'll catch up, and if not, there's no point in us getting caught for someone who isn't gonna show, alright?" Punz has no tolerance for it. He grabs Tommy again, holding on tighter, hand wrapped around his arm, carelessly jostling his shoulder and making him stumble over the sand.

Right. Tommy had almost forgotten who Punz was, generously he could be called an ally, but certainly not a friend. Tommy briefly considers threatening him, saying he'll shout for Dream if Punz doesn't let go, but he won't do that. In this rare case— although awfully more common he has to admit— leaving Wilbur behind is the best choice for both of them, at the very least a better choice than returning to Dream willingly. If Tommy gets out, he can return with reinforcements, and if Dream kills Wilbur, Tommy knows he can bring him back.

"Where the fuck did you disappear to, anyway?" Tommy is too tired to keep trying to pull away, but he can at least grumble as he's dragged along.

"*Here*. Like we fucking planned. Not *my* fault you two were incompetent." Punz sighs aggravatedly, letting go after they make it twenty blocks. "It's easier if we take this," he rummages in his inventory before placing a boat. "We're gonna have to swim at some point, can you do that?"

"There you are!" Dream's cheerful and smug tone speaks up behind Tommy. Tommy flinches, stumbling back. "What're you doing with a boat, Punz?" Dream rapidly stops enjoying the hunt, something brutally cold taking its place. He's holding a compass, but he quickly swaps it for his axe.

"Fuckin' cheater!" Tommy doesn't care how irrational it is, his first impulse is to point at the compass and announce his outrage. His first impulse should've been to get further away from Dream. Tommy sees Dream's axe coming down on him and only has time to raise a hand as if to stop him, but instead there is a shield blocking the blow. Tommy scrambles back through wet sand, knocked back to the ground and stunned to find he doesn't have a

hole butchered through his chest, instead watching with wide eyes as Punz takes a hit for him.

“Stay out of the way!” Punz snaps, shoving Dream back with his shield.

Punz doesn’t have to tell him twice. Tommy staggers to his feet, a mess of sand and salt. He doesn’t know where to run *to*. As long as he keeps Punz between him and Dream. The two of them are nothing but a whirl of metal and Netherite scraping together. Tommy almost cheers when Punz manages to draw first blood, slicing through the gap in Dream’s armor just below his shoulder, but Dream is just as deadly as before and *very* much pissed off.

“You’re a fucking lying snake!” Dream snarls, stumbling forward from the force of his swing, the axe driving through the empty space where Punz had stood a moment before.

“As if you’re not!” Punz snaps. He brings his sword down toward Dream’s neck when the man is leaned forward. “You should’ve paid me more!”

Dream ducks, the sword barely brushing against his helmet.

Tommy watches on, useless and a little awestruck that Punz is *actually* fighting for him. Tommy can at least contribute somewhat. There’s no more point in subtlety.

“*Wil!*” Tommy cups his hands around his mouth and screams as loud as he can. “*Wilbur! Come here! Wil! We’re here!*”

His brother does not appear. Tommy looks back over his shoulder to see Punz’s sword digging into the handle of Dream’s axe, a battle of brute strength that Punz is beginning to lose, Tommy can see the blade of his sword starting to slip, and the axe closer and closer to nailing him in the chest. Tommy needs that stupid bastard alive, so he turns and barrels back toward Dream, ignoring the blood flowing faster from his side and instead slamming his bony shoulder into Dream’s right arm, shifting his axe so he loses his lead. Punz quickly takes the opportunity to pull back, blocking the axe with his shield even as Tommy knows the kind of pain wrenching at his shield arm from such a move. The shield briefly useless, and Punz has to block the next blow with his sword, dancing back with the agile grace of a warrior.

They’re *almost* evenly matched, and Tommy is going to use his remaining modicum of strength to try to make it even.

“Tommy! Stay back!” Punz shouts, utterly unappreciative.

“Fuck you, man!” Tommy snarls.

Tommy grabs a fistful of wet sand and lobs it at Dream’s face. It’s too low to blind him, but from the way he pauses, furiously shouting toward Tommy, “what the fuck?!” it still did its job.

Still within the treeline, behind Tommy, Wilbur had heard Tommy’s voice and ran for the shore. He makes it just in time to witness Dream bearing down on his brother.

Punz had been expecting Dream to go after *him* again, he'd been prepared for that. He's a second behind but that second matters. When he stepped forward, he should have swung his sword. He didn't.

Months ago, Punz had told Wilbur a lie. He had made up a good story to frame his deliberate failure, and described a flaw based in empathy surpassing skill. It was a good ruse. Useful. Something meant to convince weaker men than him, a weakness he knows he would never fall prey to. His instinct would never be to *protect*, but maybe he should have known better than to think such a thing was within his control. Now, Punz sees Dream swing toward Tommy, he steps forward—

“And I grabbed Tommy. Okay? I had a split second, and in years of cold hard training to be one of the best goddamn mercenaries on this server instead of swinging my sword, protecting my bad side, all the practical things I have done my whole life, I got stupid. I got emotional and my first instinct was to grab Tommy and try to pull him back.”

It happens too fast for Tommy to really process. Punz pulls him out of the way, he steps in front of him, and Dream almost separates his head from his shoulders. Punz does not have time for regret nor peace nor dignity; his body hits the sand and blood spreads dark and heavy.

Tommy, briefly blinded by a spray of blood, tries to scream “*no!*” but he cannot say a word, only a choked, strangled cry around the taste of copper as he watches his only hope crumble.

Wilbur stumbles into this scene and he doesn't know how he keeps moving, but he does. They have the tiniest window to move as Dream yanks his axe out of Punz's corpse. Wilbur grabs Tommy by the scruff of his shirt and drags him backwards, shoving him into the boat, hopping in right behind him. He's never been weaker, but nonetheless he finds a way to kick off from the beach, close enough he feels the blade of Dream's axe brush against his ruined coat, but by then they're in the water. Wilbur rows with trembling, burning arms.

The edge of the boat digs into Tommy's back, that pain duller beside the cut across his ribs which he feels he's probably torn open worse from all his struggling. The sky tilts above him as he tries to grasp the past seconds.

Punz is dead. You aren't. Wilbur is here. He's not dead either.

Tommy struggles to sit up, brushing blood from his eyes. Wilbur's breathing is already wheezing and fragile as he desperately rows them away from the beach, focused with grim determination, staring ahead, not wasting time looking behind them where Tommy can only assume Dream is finding a way to follow.

“Portal's... the portal is back there,” Tommy says dully. His voice feels distant, unattached from his body.

“Portal isn't the priority right now, Tommy!” Wilbur says breathlessly.

“He got Punz...”

Wilbur's determined facade flickers into a wince. He nods.

Tommy blinks the blood from his eyes, spitting it out even as the taste lingers, trying to focus on Wilbur across from him. Behind him, on the shore, Tommy sees something gleaming blue, and then there's a trident spinning through the air toward them.

For a moment, it's horribly close to beautiful. The vibrant glow of the enchantment shines in the moonlight, outlining his brother in a radiant glow as the three tines pierce through his chest, the trident sticking out of his back and in a moment that glowing blur of light reminds him of wings. Wilbur's eyes widen in surprise, but he doesn't scream. He can't from the blood dripping from his lips. Tommy briefly, wildly thinks his brother is still trying to row when he starts to lean back. Until he sees the tines pull deeper into his chest, briefly dragging Wilbur with it as it returns to its wielder. Wilbur is pulled back through the air, outlined in an arc of blood and a halo of blue light, until the trident finally leaves him behind and instead his body hits the water.

"*Wil!*" Tommy lunges forward too late, brushing against his brother's tattered sleeve until he disappears into the dark waves. Tommy looks around panickedly. He doesn't know what he's looking for. No one is out here to help him. Tommy looks up in time to see the trident gleaming toward him once more and decides to beat Dream to the punch, diving into the waves, hearing the dull *thunk* of the trident piercing the boat before his ears are filled with water.

Tommy can just make out his brother's sinking figure from the glow of the trident before it's pulled back once more. Tommy knows Wilbur must be dead, but that doesn't mean anything anymore. Tommy can still save him. He's desperately hoping Dream will go back to the stasis chambers and try to get them back that way, because if Dream is still on that beach, Tommy has no idea how he's going to get out of this. He doesn't even think he's strong enough to drag Wilbur's corpse to shore. Tommy tries to pull him up, holding him under his arms as his blood darkens the water further, but he's sinking too, Wilbur is dragging him down with him. The moonlight is fading above him, and still Tommy kicks furiously, still he holds onto Wilbur's corpse. He can't lose him, if he loses him in the open ocean, he'll never find him again.

It's getting harder to see through the blood, his own surely mixing with Wilbur's as his wounds burn in the salt. Tommy *needs* air, he can't keep doing this, Wilbur or no Wilbur he doesn't know if he can even make it to the surface in time, his feet have touched down on cold sand, there's darkness creeping in, drowning is almost an old friend to him now, the moonlight is growing hazier in his vision, warping, fading to purple—

Tommy looks around wildly, his oxygen-starved brain pulling out all the stops for one last coherent attempt, heart hammering against his chest, thundering in his ears and pulsing against the water, because *holy fuck there's a portal down here*.

Tommy takes the last of his strength and kicks off the ocean floor toward the faint purple light, if there's a portal, there's *air*; there *has to be air*.

Tommy gasps, throat raw from the salt, gulping air until his chest aches and burns. He fumbles toward the edge of the cave, some submerged alcove Punz must have designed

before his untimely death, and finally for fucking *once* Tommy is lucky. He clings to the rocks, for a moment without the strength to pull himself up, barely enough to hold on and keep his head above water. Tommy takes Wilbur's tattered coat and pulls it around the rock, leaving him dangling there, tugging against the current like a morbid buoy. Tommy's arms tremble, bare feet struggling for purchase below the waves, but *finally* he gets himself over the edge enough that he can collapse onto the damp, uneven stone of the cave, chest heaving, blood washed away and replaced by salt which stings his eyes just as well. Tommy gasps, still feeling like he's choking on sea water, and he wildly wonders if there isn't any oxygen left in this cave before his body answers the question for him, he rolls over just in time to puke sea water onto the stone, his nose expelling water as well, eyes streaming with tears as he gags until there is nothing left but the burn of salt and bile. He closes his eyes, the pressure in his chest no longer from water but a rising sob. He's not done yet, he's not safe, he's not even close. *Save the tears for when you're back home.*

That daring thought is what gets him moving again. He crawls back toward the water, half expecting Wilbur to have sunk below the waves, but his brother has remained, that tattered coat serving one last purpose. Tommy grabs his arm, heaving him up over the edge in a way that would cause some serious pain if he were still alive. He gets Wilbur over the lip of the cave onto steady land before giving up, collapsing back and letting the body remain half on top of him, too weary to push him off. He squints back at the portal. He doesn't know what chance he has as is, he knows that chance is absolutely zero if he tries to struggle across the Nether roof blind dragging a corpse behind him. He looks back down at Wilbur. His brother has sand all over his face, clinging to his skin, caught in the grooves around his eyes and around the exit wound Tommy can see in his chest. Tommy clumsily pats Wilbur's head.

"I'm sorry, Wil..." he murmurs. He wriggles out from underneath the corpse, pausing for another moment to give his limp and already cold hand a squeeze. "You *know* I'm coming back for you... promise."

Tommy doesn't allow himself to stop. He knows if he looks back, he's going to lay down by his brother's corpse and pray that the sea takes them before Dream does. So instead he only looks forward, the soft *whoosh* of the portal calling to him. Tommy had forgotten how disorienting it felt to step through, the cave warping around him and bending, the hum in his ears enough that he doesn't hear the splash from the pool behind him.

Tommy winces at light of the endless blue sky above the Nether roof. He stumbles forward, the grooves of the bedrock scraping at his bare feet and the coolness of the open air is untouched by the heat of the Nether below. He's shivering immediately. He takes a few more feeble steps forward, looking around. He doesn't know what he's looking for. Maybe he should've asked Punz for more directions. Maybe he should've agreed to have a fucking revive book with him so he could've saved the bastard who promised to get him home. Tommy tries to focus on his steps, one hand clutching the torn skin across his side, blood loss as much a concern as exhaustion at this point. He just has focus on moving, *not* on the miserable thought that he and Punz had doomed each other by refusing to trust the other. They'd been quite right to, but it doomed them anyway.

Tommy doesn't know where to go. He hopes this is forward, that it's leading *somewhere*. Eventually he'll find another portal, a path, *anything*. He has to. *Anywhere is better than*

where you came from, even if it means dying alone up here.

He's too far away to hear the whirl of the portal, but he *does* hear what follows.

"Oh, Tommy!"

Tommy doesn't turn around, despite already having emptied his stomach, he feels like he's going to be sick again, instead he keeps his mouth shut tightly and stumbles a little faster. He feels the blood flow faster through his fingertips as his heart races, he's weak, and by all rights he shouldn't be able to keep going at all, but that voice, furious and vicious and *far* too close, is one last shot of adrenaline to get him to break out into an all out sprint. He's throwing himself toward an empty horizon, no portals emerge, no signs, nothing but an empty flat expanse and a consuming sky. There's nowhere to *go*, nowhere to hide, some part of him doesn't know why he's still running at all.

Tommy doesn't want to look behind him, he doesn't want to see how close he is to the end. He's not going to make it.

It's like he can hear Wilbur beside him, an echo from Limbo: *"How about this, next time, we try fighting?"*

Tommy chose the perfect time to stop. He barely starts to turn around when he's almost barreled over by Dream crashing into him. The man clearly hadn't expected him to stop. Tommy gets knocked to the side, but Dream ends up hitting the ground hard, tripping over Tommy and forced to rapidly lose momentum, the grating sound of Netherite scraping against bedrock sets his teeth on edge. Tommy gets to his feet first.

"You stopped-?"

Dream starts to speak, but Tommy doesn't wait. He scrambles forward and wraps his arms around Dream's throat, pulling back, not hoping to strangle the man, but rather to snap his neck. Dream stumbles, clearly not expecting that either, but he rolls his shoulder and throws Tommy over it, Tommy landing breathless on the stone, but he's not thinking anymore, he claws upward toward Dream's face.

"Holy shit," Dream laughs. *"You look like a fucking drowned rat and you're still trying?!"* Dream staggers to his feet, Tommy taking the chance to scramble up as well, hunched inward and defensive, a cornered animal. He's bleeding worse now. He can feel it. Dream takes a few steps back, and to Tommy's suspicion, he puts his axe away. *"Come on, I should at least fight fair!"* He replaces it with a short blade. *"Well, a little fairer."*

Tommy watches Dream carefully. He knows he's going to die, but he's not scared. He can't be bothered with fear right now, not when he can see Punz's corpse severed and Wilbur's shocked eyes as the trident pierced his chest. He's the last one left, as always, it's just him and Dream. Tommy isn't going to win, but he's going to take a chunk of Dream with him.

Dream spreads his arms, as if offering an invitation.

So Tommy turns and runs.

“What– *What the fuck are you trying to do?!*” Dream takes the bait, following him, and *definitely* faster than him.

Tommy has no reason to think Dream will fall for it twice, but he somehow has even less to lose than usual, so he stops, committing to his task in being a roadblock, squaring his shoulders, and once more sending Dream reeling. Dream hits the ground hard, probably barely bruised through his armor, but he’s on the ground again and Tommy is dizzy from the impact but no less prepared. He grabs Dream’s helmet and slams the man’s skull into the bedrock. Dream starts to stand. Tommy slams his head down again, and it’s not unlike his furious aggression toward Wilbur not long ago. There’s a strange *crunch*, and Tommy takes this as incentive, and slams Dream’s skull into the ground again like a starved otter trying to shatter a mollusk on the rocks. There’s a *crack!* far sharper than the last and Tommy realizes with giddy delight he’s begun to split open Dream’s helmet. That joy is swiftly cut short by Dream grabbing his leg and dragging him to the ground, Tommy’s back scraped open against the stone, he struggles to focus on Dream above him, but for a moment, Tommy thinks it isn’t Dream, because instead of that white mask, Tommy sees furious green eyes, a pale face molded into a furious snarl as Dream presses down on his throat.

Tommy is gripped by a new sort of terror, because Dream looks utterly ordinary; yes, there is the rage, there is the hatred and the violence, but this is just a man’s face. His blood drips from a scrape on his forehead onto Tommy’s cheek. Dream looks like a *person*.

Tommy hadn’t expected him to look like a person.

That is his last moment of coherency before there is a knife twisting in his gut. The pain burns at the edges and hardens into a deep ache as the knife tangles and shreds his organs to ribbons. Dream’s anger is felt in every scrape of the blade against bone, as it plunges deeper, like Dream is set on digging his heart out and dragging it out of his stomach.

Tommy knew he would die, he hadn’t expected to die with human eyes watching him.

Chapter End Notes

I'm FINALLY done with my senior thesis!!!! I can write fic again!!!! You all get to suffer instead!!!

Thank you all for being patient, hope a nice long chapter made it worth the wait!

As always, feedback is cherished <3

Chapter 34

Chapter Notes

CW !!! : Medical horror! Surgical horror! Torture! Dehumanization! I don't know how to be more specific, but like, it's not good! Genuinely, I think this is the most grisly I've ever gotten. It is not for the faint of heart. It is grotesque violence befitting of a fic that is Meant to be nothing but tragedy and terror.

I'm going to put a CHAPTER SUMMARY at the end, please feel free to skip this one! At any point you feel squeamish/don't vibe with it, know you can skip to the end and read the summary!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tommy gets to see Wilbur again, and while that is a relief, his first thought is of Punz and where he might be in all this darkness.

“Wil, I...” Tommy doesn’t know what to say as he stumbles into Wilbur’s limbo.

Wilbur stops his pacing, looking at Tommy with wide eyes. “You... you didn’t make it?”

Tommy’s urgency fades into something wearier. “Did you really think I would?”

Wilbur doesn’t have a retort. He nods curtly.

Tommy scans the train station. “Is... is Punz here?”

“Hm?” Wilbur looks around, puzzled. “Um, I mean, if he’s dead I’m guessing somewhere, but I haven’t seen him.”

“Have you *looked*?”

Wilbur scoffs. “Have I *looked*— I mean, why would I *want* to see Punz? And doesn’t this shit rely on us *wanting* to see the other person?”

Tommy shrugs. “Well, I’ve stumbled into Schlatt before, and he’s not exactly a dear friend.” Tommy sits, legs hanging over the empty tracks. He’s lost bodily pains of his fatigue from pushing himself so hard, but there’s a deeper weariness that lingers. That ache of anxiety in his stomach can now only remind him of a knife.

Wilbur sighs, joining him. “Well, I think we did an alright job, all things considered.”

“Did we?” Tommy mutters. “I think we had a rough go of it from the start, and we were fucking *doomed* from the start, because of... because of *this!*” Tommy waves his left fist

furiously, gesturing to the cuff around his wrist. “He was fucking cheating!”

“Yeah,” Wilbur winces. “Dunno what we could’ve done about that one, though. Was Punz supposed to... to melt it off on the fly?”

Tommy scowls. “If you want my honest fucking answer, I would’ve preferred Punz chopped my hand off if it meant we got out of here.”

Wilbur has nothing to say to that, horrified but not exactly able to disagree. A pause, both of them slipping into melancholy. Wilbur is the one to push against it first. “I mean, think about it this way, considering how much shit we’ve been through, what could he *actually* do to us that’s worse? Hm?”

Tommy gives him a look, before startling him by knocking against Wilbur’s skull.

“Ow! The fuck was that for?!”

“There is no wood to knock on here, so, I’m improvising. You just *asked* for bad shit to happen,” Tommy rolls his eyes.

“No, but really. What’s he gonna do to me? Cut my fingers off?” Wilbur does some slightly limited jazz hands. “What’s he gonna do to you, bury you alive?”

Tommy sighs heavily, laying back on the tile. “I mean, both of those things happening would be fucking horrible.”

Wilbur lays beside him, still oddly at ease. “And we’re still here, still...” Wilbur laughs, that high cackle of his. “*Sane.*”

“Yeah, yeah that sounded real sane of you, Wilbur.”

Wilbur shrugs. “Sanity schmanity, as I always say.”

“No you don’t.”

“Whatever he does to us,” Wilbur pauses, finally looking weighted for a moment. “We’ll endure it like always, yeah?”

Famous last words.

Tommy sits up when his brother disappears from his side. “Wil?!” Tommy calls uselessly. He waits with bated breath, heart racing for him to get taken as well. His dread only grows worse when he doesn’t. “*Wil!*” Tommy shouts more desperately.

He doesn’t know why Dream took Wilbur first, but he knows it can’t be for anything good. Every hour that passes in the silence is another horrible thought of what Dream is playing at. He can’t stand being alone, trapped with the waiting game, so he tries to find Punz.

“Punz?!” Tommy shouts. He doesn’t know why he thinks yelling louder will make a difference, this is not a physical distance that can be crossed. There is no reply. Tommy

doesn't know if he'd thank Punz for trying or cuss him out for not sending coordinates to Tubbo. It doesn't matter. Punz does not emerge and Tommy doesn't know if he really wanted to find him anyway. He paces, struggling to bury thoughts of what could be happening to his brother right now. That torment almost makes him wish to be brought back.

He regrets the thought.

"Wake up."

Tommy comes to hunched over and in chains. He's sitting backwards on a chair, its back digging into his throat, his wrists bound together and to the legs of the chair so he can barely look up. This setup is familiar. *Oh, fuck.*

"Tommy? You with me again?" Dream is just visible out of his peripheral, a shape in the corner of his eye. Tommy isn't trying to look at Dream, he's staring at his left wrist, which currently lacks a certain iron band, its place marked out by a dark scar now mottled by what Tommy assumes was metal melted near his dead flesh.

"Oh, *fuck*," Tommy says hoarsely, trying to look up, to tug free, but all that does is yank on his wrists painfully. *Even if you could get free, what then?* The thought doesn't stop him from trying.

Dream laughs. He doesn't sound angry, instead just that eerie, agitated excitement, far worse than anger. "Oh, you caught on fast, huh?"

"N-No—" Tommy doesn't know why his instinct is still to plead. He knows Dream can't be stopped.

"No?" Dream scoffs. "Are you actually telling me *no*? You'd think after all our time together, you would've realized that *your* say doesn't matter, Tommy. Not with this, not with consequences for *your* actions."

Tommy still struggles, words useless, but he still tries to pull against the chains, attempting to look up even as it strains his neck.

"You know what I said, Tommy! I mean, I guess to be fair, you didn't try to take the metal *off*, but you sure tried to fucking run, *didn't you?*" Dream's rage bleeds through, grabbing him by the back of his neck, forcing Tommy to stop his struggling and leaving him choked and hunched inward. "Stop fucking moving, alright? You're in enough trouble as is. And don't forget there are consequences for people *other* than you," Dream hisses, pushing Tommy's head down until he fears his throat will break against the metal of the chair. Dream lets go, Tommy dares to feel weak with relief, gasping for breath. Dream walks past him and out of his line of sight, but Tommy recognizes the sound of a body dragged across stone.

"W-Wil?" Tommy tries to look at him. "Wilbur?!"

"Oh, I'm pretty sure he can hear you, Tommy," Dream says. "He just can't respond, really. I'm sorry I started the party without you, but I feel like you can catch up." Dream tosses Wilbur to the ground in front of Tommy, Wilbur biting back a muffled cry of pain.

“Wil?! Wil, are you—” Tommy stops himself, mouth hanging open as his eyes are first drawn to his brother’s broken leg, before turning to his face. Tommy almost can’t comprehend it. Wilbur is covered in blood, and for a brief, desperate moment he wonders if he tried to take a bite out of Dream again, but Wilbur is *still bleeding*, blood welling up around his lips and through pinprick holes, dripping down black cords criss-crossing over his mouth. “Fuck, holy fuck, y-you actually— No, you *can’t*—” Tommy spots a bloody needle still hanging loose from the thread and his denial dies in his throat. Wilbur looks at his little brother, knowing he cannot save him, but there’s still something like pleading behind his eyes, tears unable to make a dent in the blood on the lower half of his face. He’s been bleeding for a while from the amount of it drenching his neck.

“I always said Wilbur’s mouth was what got him in the most trouble, right?” Dream says cheerfully. He kneels beside Wilbur, grabbing his jaw, a whimpering sob bubbles up around the blood. Wilbur’s hands are bound behind his back. He doesn’t even try to struggle, eyes tightly shut, already familiar with this process. Tommy is almost distracted by Dream’s stupid fucking face, spattered with blood, smirking and unhidden. There is a small cut and a dark bruise on his forehead, covered in part by a bandage. Tommy wishes he could take more consolation in that. It’s surreal to hear that man’s voice come from anywhere but behind a mask, but this time the horror is less startling to Tommy, mostly because of what it is framed next to. “Thought you might want to be here for the home stretch,” Dream assesses his work, grabbing the needle, turning his victim’s head to look carefully at the few inches that remain unsewn, his face too close to Wilbur’s, too at ease with the blood Wilbur sprays with each painful exhale.

“You can’t! Dream, please, *please*, just stop it! *Stop it!* He didn’t know! Wilbur didn’t know what we had planned until the very end, *please*, he has nothing to do with this!” Tommy rambles uselessly, unable to look away as Wilbur flinches, burying a whine as the needle pierces his top lip. “*Please!*”

“Shut the fuck up, Tommy. You don’t want to give me an excuse to be *worse*, do you? You keep that up, I’m cutting out his fucking tongue,” Dream snaps, tugging the thread taut, Wilbur struggling to spit out the fresh blood through the mesh already there. Dream speaks to Wilbur, slow and condescending. “You know, I said I was gonna muzzle you, Wilbur, but I *promise* I hadn’t originally planned on it being this...” Dream mulls it over, that classic tilt of his head joined by green eyes contemplatively scanning the ceiling, needle held poised in his right hand. “*Surgical?*” Dream finds the word he was looking for, nodding. “Yeah, well. Things change.” He shrugs, still smiling far too smugly. The needle goes in again.

Tommy falls silent, choking back sobs, his throat raw from being bruised against the metal. He doesn’t want to look, but he can’t bring himself to turn away, captivated far more by the vile *interest* in Dream’s expression; his thoughtful and careful gaze, the smile that crosses his face too mildly to have been deliberate, Dream is smiling purely because he’s having *fun*. There was never any attempt to garner a sadist’s facade, Dream was never playing up relishing in the violence, Tommy almost wants to gag as he can read it on Dream’s face, the *satisfaction* he gets from the needle piercing Wilbur’s lip, Wilbur flinching every time, unable to struggle from Dream’s hold on his jaw. Tommy also notes that Wilbur’s leg, while he can see it’s not quite right, flesh pushing against bone strangely, slightly to the side of where it should be, it doesn’t seem that the bone is shifting at all while he struggles. Tommy

realizes with a twist in his stomach, that Dream had broken Wilbur's leg and forced it to heal back wrong, just a little off, enough that Wilbur has no chance of *running* anywhere. Tommy has a feeling they won't be going on hunts any time soon.

After what feels like hours, Dream *finally* ties off the thread, letting go of Wilbur so he collapses onto the damp ground, gagging and spitting blood through the cords, unable to open his mouth at all, even as blood continues to fill it. His attempts to stop himself from choking on it lead to him pushing more blood through the sewn holes, and from the way Wilbur curls inward, struggling to bury sobs, unable to claw at his own face with his hands bound behind him, it's agonizing. Tears continue to make tiny divots in the crust of dried blood along his upper lip, but other than that, he's given up on struggling.

"Don't *worry*," Dream rolls his eyes, still grinning like a child getting away with dressing up the family dog. "It's not *permanent*. Eventually, he'll die and it'll fix itself! I mean, unless it heals before then, then who knows, maybe it'll *stick*," he leans over Wilbur, taunting him, threatening to brush his hand over his work, laughing when Wilbur tries to squirm away, continuing to cough up blood even as it tugs agonizingly on the stitching. Dream shakes his hands out, blood spattering on the floors as he seems to refocus. "Right! That's Wilbur handled." Dream claps, horribly giddy. "*Your* turn, Tommy! Don't worry, I'm not planning on sewing *your* mouth shut, however many times I've threatened it. *Both* of you not being able to talk would get really boring, and we all know Punz isn't exactly a conversationalist."

Tommy is distracted for maybe a moment by the insidious thought of where Punz might be right now, but Dream garners his focus again with ease. In one hand, Dream has the lodestone now freed of iron, in the other, a scalpel. Tommy knows exactly what's coming. He shuts his eyes tightly, shoulders hunched inward as if that could stop Dream from carving open his neck. Dream circles him, forcing his head down so he can see his canvas more clearly.

"Hm, now, I honestly don't know how this is gonna go. I mean, there's every chance I'll paralyze you. And last time, you got lucky and dying fixed it. This could be a more long term problem. So, after this you'll have to keep me updated on if you've been feeling any numbness. Not that I'll fix it, necessarily, but maybe I'll think about it."

Tommy gasps when he feels the blade press to his skin, but Dream stops there, one hand holding tightly onto Tommy's shoulder as he leans down closer, voice soft and dangerous. Tommy shudders.

"Tommy, tell me something," Dream says thoughtfully. "And I want you to be honest. Is... all this," he gestures toward Wilbur and the blood on the floor, "*worse* than how you were living before you decided to ruin things? Before your little escape attempt with that fucking *traitor*?"

Tommy doesn't say a word, Dream's question processing slowly and confusingly in his adrenaline addled brain. *Is this worse?*

Dream pinches the back of his neck tighter. "I'm expecting an *answer*, Tommy."

“Y-Yes?” Tommy tries weakly. Fucking *obviously* yes, but Tommy doesn’t understand *why* Dream is bothering asking.

“Meaning, you shouldn’t have fucking done this, right?” Dream is patronizing as he is vicious. “You didn’t sound too *sure*, there, Tommy. In a few minutes, maybe I’ll ask again.”

And with that, Tommy cries out when the scalpel pierces his neck.

Dream pauses, the blade still under his skin. “Hey, stop that. Screaming makes you move too much, and trust me, you want me to be *careful* right now,” Dream digs in further and Tommy bites his tongue so hard he tastes blood, but he doesn’t scream again.

Tommy’s vision blurs as he fights off a sob, knowing that shuddering in his chest would be enough movement for Dream to butcher his spinal cord, instead, he blinks away tears and stares down at his brother, curled on the floor in front of him. He focuses on his brother’s eyes, just as wounded, just as sorry as his own had been watching Dream render Wilbur mute. He tries so hard to just focus on that, on anything but the scalpel digging in deeper, carving out a niche big enough for a lodestone about the size of an acorn.

“I c-can’t–” Tommy starts to speak, barely above a whisper, stopping and biting his tongue once more when the slight motion from even that shifts the scalpel under his skin.

Dream pauses. “What was that, Tommy?” He sounds almost intrigued by Tommy having the audacity to speak.

“Can’t f-feel–” Tommy swallows back a sob, shutting his eyes tightly, “my fingers, they’re–” He stops, fearing his speaking will cause the scalpel to shift enough to make it worse.

“What, already?” Dream sounds intrigued rather than concerned. “I haven’t even put the lodestone in yet.” Tommy doesn’t reply. Dream hums, considering this. “Well, that’s not too bad. You can function like that, right? I’m gonna keep going, just to see if it can work. But, yeah, I guess let me know if it gets worse?” Dream laughs. Tommy is caught off guard enough that he screams when Dream resumes his efforts, but Dream doesn’t scold him for it, merely holds him steady by the hair.

Tommy keeps his eyes shut. Wilbur wishes his hands weren’t bound so he could hold his. He wishes he could speak, to offer some words of comfort, but all he can do is lie there and watch the blood drip around Tommy’s neck and pool in his thin collarbones. Tommy receives no warning as Dream places the lodestone in the wound. He once more bites his already bloody tongue at the strange, terrible agony of something being *placed behind his spine*.

Dream’s hold on his hair loosens, gentler now. “We’re almost done here, Tommy,” he says with a cruel note of sympathy, but Wilbur can see his face, he can see the man’s eyes gleaming as he digs into the wound, the blood pouring more heavily around Tommy’s neck until it almost looks like thin, red claws beginning to strangle him. Dream finally gets out a health potion, working carefully. He doesn’t want the lodestone to shift, so first he uses a dropper to heal the cut from the inside, working his way out until his latest act of brutality is only a small, rough scar to the right of Tommy’s spine. Dream finally lets go, stepping back,

triumphant. “How’s that feel, Tommy?” Dream’s voice is still that awful pantomime of delicacy, as if he’s a doctor performing a surgery instead of staking a claim on this boy’s soul.

Tommy doesn’t reply, exhausted as he hangs limply over the back of the chair, trembling. Dream circles him until he’s back into his line of sight. Dream grabs his chin, forcing him to look up at him at a painful angle, rendered worse by this nagging pressure, the sharpness of the lodestone impeding his spine from bending properly. Tommy opens his eyes, looking up at Dream, wanting to plead with him, but not knowing what’s left to be saved. Tommy’s fingertips feel numb.

Dream speaks slowly. “I’m gonna ask you *again*. Is this *worse*?”

Tommy’s answer comes more easily now, voice still hoarse and ragged, but there’s not a shred of uncertainty left. “Yeah– Yes. Yes, it’s worse...”

“There we go. Glad you were sure of yourself this time.” Dream tuts him softly, as if pitying. “Aw, don’t you look *miserable*.” Dream lets go, Tommy’s head falling forward weakly. “I know I said we were almost done, and, well, I sort of meant it, there’s just...” Dream twirls the scalpel through his fingers. “You broke my mask, Tommy.” Dream says it like a child pouting over a broken toy, his expression finally visible so it’s accompanied by an exaggerated frown, eyebrows raised. Tommy tries to brace himself for the next blow. He is far more startled by Dream unlocking the chains around his wrists. He barely has to nudge Tommy backwards from where he had been leaning for Tommy to slip off the chair with a weak yelp, collapsing onto the stone floor, eyes shut tight as he feels like the numbness has begun to spread up his hands. Tommy opens them again when Dream nudges him with his foot, rolling him onto his back, crouching down beside him. Tommy stares up at him bleakly, too weak to beg.

“I could find a replacement, I guess,” Dream continues as if this is all conversational, gesturing with the scalpel still in hand. “But I think you don’t need to see the mask to be reminded of it, right?” Dream’s eyes scan Tommy’s face, lingering thoughtfully on either cheek, considering his collarbone. Dream smiles, exhaling a laugh. “D’you remember when I said I was gonna carve my name into your skin? Over and over until it sticks that your life *belongs to me*?”

Tommy doesn’t say a word, he doesn’t move, he just waits, dread deep in the pit of his stomach. Some terrible part of him feels that somehow he’s earned this, not because he had disobeyed Dream, but because he hadn’t gotten away. He knows in theory he shouldn’t blame himself for his captivity, but that doesn’t really matter. He cannot fathom a world where Dream stops, his violence is as unyielding as a force of nature, so it had been down to him to get out, and he’d failed. *What did you think would happen?*

“Well,” Dream breaks his train of thought. “My *name* might be a little excessive.” Dream pins down Tommy’s shoulder, pulling the loose and tattered collar of his shirt to the side, scalpel hovering over his pale and sharp canvas. Tommy, on instinct than any real sense, pushes against Dream’s chest when he draws blood, a soft whine escaping through gritted teeth as the knife digs in, he vaguely hears Wilbur’s muffled outrage, but Dream doesn’t even notice, far more intent on carving a smiley face into Tommy’s flesh. Tommy has nowhere else to look but at Dream’s face, his eyes gleaming, a soft, satisfied smile as he digs the knife

in deep. Dream takes out the health pot, putting a few drops onto the wound, wiping away the blood. “Hm,” he tilts his head, assessing the work. “Thought about putting it on your face, but I want you to be able to see it too. So, this works, right? There’s a scar now,” he tilts his head back and forth, mulling it over, “but... it’s really *light*, y’know? I think it’ll take a few more tries for it to really stick.”

“Please...” Tommy murmurs, eyes shut tightly, hands feebly continuing to push against the Netherite chestplate. Dream carves into him again, a few drops of the health potion, and then again.

“Y’know, it’s a bit less fun when you’re too tired to even scream. I’m carving into your bony shoulder, and you’re not gonna bother with screaming? Crying? *Something* other than that pathetic pleading?”

Tommy doesn’t reply. Dream doesn’t stop. So it goes, until Tommy almost feels like he could drift into unconsciousness, the rhythm of skin burning and then healing and burning again *and again and again* until it becomes mundane. He doesn’t want to not care about pain. He’s so tired.

Finally, Dream stops. “There we go! That’s pretty clear,” he leans back, smearing away blood. “Hm, might have to go over it again later, but not a bad start.” He pats Tommy’s cheek in some harsh imitation of fondness. “*Now* we’re done, Tommy! See? That wasn’t so bad! Come *on*, don’t look at me like that, you big baby.”

Tommy’s hand trembles as he goes to his shoulder, there he can feel the raised flesh of magically restored scar tissue, but it’s not merely that, scar tissue is raised, but there remains a seam along each line drawn. Dream had dug in and healed him so many times that the cuts he had made outlined in flesh, divots in Tommy’s skin that while healed, remain deep. *That wasn’t so bad!* Tommy’s hatred wakes up. Tommy is no longer chained down and Dream is within reach. He doesn’t want to give up, he doesn’t want to accept pain as his reality. Not without a fight. Tommy has tried playing along, he’s tried snapping into not caring and Dream always found a way to twist that out of him, but Tommy knows that for those few seconds of reckless resistance, it feels worth it. Dream starts to stand, but Tommy grabs the edge of his chestplate, dragging him back down. He can finally see Dream’s face. Dream gave him a scar, Tommy feels he should return the favor. Dream has not repaired or replaced his helmet. Tommy takes him by surprise, as always Dream underestimating him is his greatest advantage. He lunges forward and bites down on Dream’s ear, Dream screams, but by then Tommy is already ripping away before Dream has the chance to pry him off. Tommy spits out flesh and blood, wheezing with hysterical laughter. Dream backhands him hard enough his vision goes white, but he doesn’t stop laughing. Tommy can’t feel his arms. His neck hurts.

“You’re such a fucking brat!” Dream snarls, one hand cradling his bloodied skull. “And *you* were supposed to shut the fuck up!” He turns on Wilbur, who isn’t in a place to laugh, but is doing his best from the blood bubbling up from his lips.

“I’ll... I’ll bite you again, bitch!” Tommy struggles to sit up, Dream taking a step back as if this starved, hysterical kid could do any more harm, but Tommy just collapses back onto the

stone. “F-Fuck...” Tommy wheezes, breathless and sore. His shoulder is healed, but the pain lingers, enduring after being cut open over and over.

Dream leaves them, likely to take care of the blood now pouring down his face. Tommy giggles, still breathless. He stops and hears a strange, bubbling wheeze.

“You... you alright, Wil?” Tommy glances over at him.

Wilbur still lays on his side, arms bound behind his back. He looks up at Tommy, his mouth far bloodier than Tommy’s, blood still dripping from his mouth. It’s not like he can reply.

Tommy sighs. “Yeah. That’s what I thought.”

The vicious shred of joy fades into an oppressive weight.

“He’s... Well, I was gonna say he’s not gonna forgive this, but I actually think,” Tommy laughs. “I actually think it’s gonna take him a while to think of anything more creative than... y’know,” Tommy gestures vaguely to the room. Silence. “Fuck, sorry man, I know you can’t reply.” Tommy looks down at his shoulder. He can see it, clearly outlined in pink, raised skin around a dark seam like carved clay. That stupid fucking smile. He doesn’t know how a mere symbol can feel worse than something digging into his spine, but it almost does.

“Had a thought, Wil,” Tommy murmurs, brushing against the scarring. He glances over at his brother, who listens. It’s all he can do. So Tommy tries to offer some solace. “He can kill us a hundred times over and we both know he’ll bring us back eventually. But us? We only need to kill him once. Eventually, we’ve got to get him.” Tommy manages a crooked grin he assumes Wilbur would reciprocate if the thought weren’t so painful.

Dream returns and Tommy gives him a look he hope appears bored.

“Okay, now that I’ve punished you both, it’s time for your reward,” Dream says. “Get up.”

Tommy eyes Dream warily. He doesn’t trust a word out of that man’s mouth.

Dream sighs irritably. He’s wearing a helmet once more, and his ear has stopped bleeding. “I said if you won on one of the hunts, I’d leave you alone, give you food, might even let you two share a cell. And I am a man of my word. Even if I caught you in the end, I’d say you got close enough. If I didn’t know Punz had probably ruined it, I might’ve used the stasis to get you back, see? I’m being *honest*. You earned a reward. Obviously, I had to punish you first, but still. Now get up before I change my mind and do some more permanent fucking damage, alright?”

Tommy struggles to sit up. His spine feels pinched and painful. Tommy manages to clamber to his unsteady feet, but Wilbur barely sits up with his hands bound. Not to mention his leg probably isn’t easy to stand on right now. Tommy goes to Wilbur, helping him up, letting him lean his bad side against him. Tommy tries to ignore that Wilbur’s weight against him feels distant. Maybe it’s psychosomatic. He’s expecting to go numb so it feels worse than it actually is. Maybe.

“Come on,” Dream turns into the corridor. Tommy sees no point in not following. Dream turns and gestures with a flourish into a new doorway off the hall.

Tommy doesn’t move, staring into the dark like he’s expecting something to jump out at them. Wilbur is doing his best to lean against the wall so Tommy doesn’t have to carry him, but he cannot put weight on his injured leg.

“You should accept my gift, Tommy. You’re being ungrateful,” Dream says scoldingly. “Unless you want me to separate you two and beat Wilbur so senseless he screams through my stitching?”

Tommy scowls, but Dream’s words are incentive enough. He does his best to pull Wilbur toward the doorway. It’s dark. Tommy just crosses the threshold when he feels Dream push him forward. That’s all it takes for Tommy and therefore Wilbur to fall down three steps and into a pool of water. It’s shallow, just above the ankle, but still deeper than their usual cells. Tommy turns back without a plan of what to say, but before he can, stone slides into place, cutting off the dim blue light of the hall. There is still one light, a redstone torch placed above the entrance, like a red eye staring at them through the darkness. Tommy hears the water splash softly, turning to see Wilbur fighting to sit up and get his injured face out of the filthy water.

“Shit, sorry, Wil,” Tommy grabs him by the shoulders, doing his best to tug Wilbur up so he can sit more steadily. “Maybe I can...” Tommy shuffles behind Wilbur, the water splashing and echoing against the high ceilings. This room is relatively large, nowhere near the size of the dome, but maybe twice the size of the cells. There’s nothing else here, though, just those three steps up to the doorway, a single dull torch, and a thin layer of water. Tommy squints in the gloom at the ropes around Wilbur’s wrists, they’re bloodied and bruised from his wrists being tugged on as he was dragged from place to place, but Tommy does his best to dig into the knots, hands unsteady and nails already broken and bloody as he tries to loosen it. Tommy winces. “Right, I’ve got an idea, but you just gotta roll with it for me, yeah?”

Wilbur glances at him over his shoulder, before giving an uneasy nod.

“Right, lean forward. Like, sit up more, yeah, like that.” Tommy crouches down, hesitating for another moment, before biting down on the rope, not planning on gnawing through it, but rather tugging it free. Right now his teeth are a lot stronger than his fingers. It starts to work, even as it sends a piercing headache through his jaw and up to his skull, and then Tommy feels a *crack*.

“Fuck,” Tommy sits back. “Oh, goddamnit, I wasn’t trying to...” Tommy reaches back into his own mouth, unfazed by the taste of a multitude of blood on his hands and far more concerned by the loose molar he pulls out, the tooth cracked down the middle. Wilbur looks back at him, wincing sympathetically, but unable to voice aloud anymore of his unrest. Tommy continues gloomily. “Y’know, it’s sort of bullshit that Dream doesn’t offer dental,” Tommy lets out a barking laugh that sharpens the pain both of his tooth and his neck. “I dunno if revival constitutes as a healthcare plan, but it definitely doesn’t do much in the tooth department. Dream needs to like, kidnap a dentist. *And* an ophthalmologist,” he adds.

Wilbur gives him a look, clearly wanting to make a comment. Tommy does his best.

"I know, *I know*, it's *optometrist*," Tommy raises his hands in defeat. "Actually, though, hold on a sec, I think... I think that might've been worth it." It's a strange thought, that untying Wilbur's hands is somehow worth a tooth, but their standards have been skewed for a long time now. Tommy reassesses the knot, some of the fibers have been torn, and part of the rope is tugged loose. "Well, I am fucking amazing. I'm a beaver, Wil. I am the greatest beaver to ever live. My teeth are so dexterous it makes the other beavers jealous, Wil," Tommy nods astutely as he works the loosened knot until Wilbur's bloodied wrists are finally freed.

Wilbur seems to collapse inward, shoulders slumped forward. Tommy is familiar with the agony of arms that haven't been able to move for hours suddenly relaxed, both pain and relief. Wilbur's first attempt at movement is to bring a trembling hand up to his face, flinching away the moment he brushes against the thread and definitely causes sharp pain to pierce through each wound.

Tommy feels sick. "Next step, Wil. We'll— We'll get that shit off of you, alright? We'll do that, then."

Wilbur stares at him, a hand going to the back of his own neck, nodding toward Tommy.

Tommy does the same, unsettled to find that he cannot feel the lodestone from the surface, only a thin scar. "Can't do nothing for me on that front, I'm afraid. It's..." Tommy's voice tremors. "It's in there. Dream knows if we try to dig it out, I end up dead, or worse fucking paralyzed..." Tommy shudders, before tensing as that motion makes him more aware of whatever strange edge is still digging against his spine. "It's like the fucker put a tumor on me. He *has* to know it's... it's gonna get bad," Tommy stops himself. He doesn't want to get choked up.

Wilbur hesitates, clearly wanting to convey something and struggling. He grabs Tommy's hand and brushes lightly over his fingertips, before pressing hard on his palm.

"Oi!" Tommy pulls away. "Yeah, I felt that, dickhead. It's like my fingertips are sort of tingly now, but only like, sometimes and in some ways. It's like they're always asleep sort of. Like the staticky shit I feel in Limbo sometimes."

Wilbur nods gloomily, scanning the darkness. He notices something, pointing to the back corner of the room. Tommy whips around, heart already beating a little faster, but all Wilbur had seen was two wooden platforms in opposite back corners, the only dry patches available.

"Oh, we get our own islands," Tommy says sarcastically. "How fuckin' lovely." Still, he splashes toward one corner, pleasantly surprised to find a plate with a loaf of bread waiting as well as a glass bottle of water. "Looks like he wasn't lying about the food bit either!" He looks over at Wilbur who has limped with some difficulty over to the opposite platform. Wilbur holds up the bread like he's just been given coal for Christmas. He slumps back against the cold, damp stone wall and offers the bread to Tommy.

"Ah, shit. Sorry, Wil," Tommy leaves the food there, it doesn't feel quite as appealing now. Wilbur once more offers him the bread. Tommy grudgingly takes it before moving it to the other corner of the room. The platforms are designed for one person to curl up on, but if they remain sitting up, maybe they can sit side by side. Tommy full intends on squeezing on it

next to his brother. Wilbur presses himself into the corner to make room, motioning for Tommy to sit beside him. Tommy obliges, but he doesn't settle just yet.

"Just..." Tommy scans Wilbur's bloodied face. "Let me see if I can help, yeah?"

Wilbur leans back further, looking like there's nothing he'd like less.

"I won't do it if you don't want me to, man, but it's not like the fuckin' rope you had on your wrists, it's loads thinner. How hard could it be for me to break it?" Tommy shrugs. "I mean, it's probably still gonna hurt either way, but if I break it, you'll be able to, y'know, *talk* again."

Wilbur hesitates, wincing. He nods, shutting his eyes tightly.

Tommy does his best to assess the wound. It's hard to distinguish things under the blood, especially when their only light is like a fucking hot coal stuck to the ceiling. The bleeding has slowed somewhat, the blood crusting around the cord which likely helped stem the flow. Tommy hesitates, reaching forward. Wilbur still waits with his eyes closed, bracing. Tommy grabs onto part of the cord, it slippery and thick with blood. Wilbur flinches from just that, but he doesn't pull away. Tommy grabs the same length of cord with his other hand, intending to rip it apart. He tries to tug, and his grip slips through the blood until he's pushing against the wounds. *Now* Wilbur jerks away, a muffled whimper escaping through gritted teeth as he pushes Tommy away, his other hand covering his mouth, not quite close enough to press down.

Tommy doesn't take the shove personally, sitting back up with a grimace. "Fuck, I'm sorry, Wil. I don't... I don't know if it's long enough for me to... to pull on it without hitting your face like that. I could still try it. If I yank really hard it should only hurt worse for a second—"

On the word *yank* Wilbur shakes his head furiously.

"Fuck! Fine, can't say I didn't try," Tommy huffs. Silence sets in. Tommy can't stop staring at his brother's bloodied face. His efforts had only made the holes near that bit of thread start bleeding again. Tommy sighs, feeling like a weight is pressing down on his chest. Wilbur looks back, weary and almost apologetic. Tommy knows his own pain had been horrible to endure, but the visible nature of the malice directed at Wilbur, what it takes from him so suddenly, it's a bolder type of cruelty, and Tommy knows why. Dream knows the best way to hurt Tommy is to make sure he can see how badly the consequences fell back on Wilbur. "I'm so sorry, Wil."

Wilbur waves him off, as close to *not your fault* as he can manage.

Tommy sits back wearily. Wilbur moves closer, arm around Tommy's shoulder so his brother lays back against him instead of the cold stone. It's enough that Tommy almost isn't shivering. Tommy's hand wanders to the scar on his shoulder. He can trace between the scar tissue, like there's still an open seam there, even if he knows it's healed. He doesn't think he has any other scar tissue like this, but then again, Dream had never been so precisely continuous.

Tommy is broken from his melancholy by Wilbur grabbing his hand, for a second Tommy thinks he's running another check for paralysis, until he realizes whatever Wilbur is tracing onto his palm is more deliberate.

"Oh, got it! It's..." Tommy thinks carefully. The tingling numbness makes it harder to parse. "Is it an i?"

Wilbur nods, moving on to the next.

"L?"

A nod.

"Another i?"

Another nod.

"K. Um, E?" Tommy gets faster, continuing until Wilbur taps his palm, as if to indicate a period. "I like your idea?"

Wilbur nods, almost beaming.

"What... what idea, Wil?" Tommy frowns.

Wilbur sits back more heavily, exasperated. Explaining would involve a lot more tracing. He taps Tommy's shoulder, getting him to look over. He points back and forth between the two of them, then pointing to the doorway, to Dream, and miming slitting his throat.

"The... we only gotta kill him once? You liked that bit?"

Wilbur nods.

Tommy almost laughs. "Yeah, me too, Wil," he leans back beside him, exhaustion pressing in. "Easier said than done. Ow!" Tommy sits up sharply when Wilbur punches his arm. "The fuck was that for?!"

Wilbur gives him a pointed look.

"When did *you* decide to be a fucking optimist?!" Tommy snaps.

Wilbur clearly wants to retort, but instead he just throws his hands in the air exasperatedly, furious at his loss of voice. That frustration is growing worse than the pain.

"I know what you'd say," Tommy nods wisely, putting on a high voice which most definitely does not sound like Wilbur, "*I'm not an optimist, Tommy, I killed myself!*" Tommy makes himself laugh. "Well, me too, bitch, you aren't special."

Wilbur starts to laugh before sharply stopping, wincing and once more hovering over his mouth, afraid to actually touch the wounds.

“Shit, sorry.”

Once more, Wilbur waves him off. He stares at the doorway underneath the torch, pointing at it. He mimes someone walking with two fingers, and then punches his own palm. It’s relatively clear. *When Dream walks in, we jump him.*

“Now you’re talking!”

Wilbur gives him a look.

“Well, not *talking*, I guess.”

Wilbur points to the doorway again.

“Yeah, right, might as well move now,” Tommy sighs heavily before standing, moving to help Wilbur up.

Wilbur stops him, pointing over to the other platform and the bread on top of it.

“No, no I’m not eating if you can’t,” Tommy shakes his head.

Wilbur folds his arms over his chest, nestling back against the bricks, defiant.

“Oh, what, you’re not moving until I eat some shitty fuckin’ bread?” Tommy puts his hands on his hips and feels oddly like Tubbo.

Wilbur nods.

“Well, not like you can *make* me,” Tommy stares at him, daring Wilbur to protest in some way.

Wilbur remains resolute, refusing to move, eyebrows raised, nodding to the bread. They’re at a standstill.

“Fine, guess Dream gets to stroll in as he likes!” Tommy snaps. “I don’t wanna eat if *you* can’t! Come on, it’s fucked up.”

Wilbur clearly wants to say something. He sits up, one hand pressed to his forehead as he thinks through his plan for this round of morbid fucking charades. Wilbur once more points to the bread, then back to Tommy, and then he flexes his starved arms.

Tommy grins, amused. “What’s that supposed to be?”

Wilbur flicks him off, which looks a bit less accurate considering he’s missing *both* index fingers. Wilbur’s eyebrows furrow as he tries to flick Tommy off with his ring finger.

“Fine, fine, keep your hair on, I get it,” Tommy splashes over to the other platform, continuing in his high-pitched Wilbur voice, “*oh, Tommy, because you’re such a strong big man who’s gonna kill god all by yourself, you’ve got to keep your strength up! Please,*

Tommy, eat the bread for me so you can be a hero and save us all and also kick Dream's ass!"

Tommy takes a vindictive bite of the slightly damp bread and gives Wilbur an accusing look, as if to say, *happy now?*

Wilbur claps.

Tommy says something that sounds sort of like *dickhead* through a mouthful of bread before returning to his brother's side. Tommy already feels sick from the bread, Wilbur should be content that he ate any of it. "Right, then, we've got to move. *Operation jump god* means we gotta be on either side of that door," he pulls Wilbur to his feet and tries to ignore the deep ache piercing his neck as his muscles strain to lift him.

Wilbur pauses, standing somewhat steadily. He attempts to put weight on his somewhat unbroken leg before stopping with a wince. He stops his efforts, patting Tommy's arm to get his attention. Now he looks disapproving, pointing at the doorway.

"What, now you don't wanna?"

Wilbur shakes his head, pointing more insistently at the doorway before after a moment's hesitation pointing to the scar on Tommy's shoulder.

"What, Dream?"

Wilbur nods.

"What about him?"

Wilbur points back at Tommy, and then to the scar, and then to the door.

"Wilbur, I have no fucking clue what you're trying to say here, man."

Wilbur hits his forehead with his palm before wincing as that vibration tugs at the cord, before grabbing Tommy's hand, spelling out one short word:

G O D

"What, god? Me saying I'm gonna fight god? That's what's got you all worked up?"

Wilbur once more points very deliberately at the scar on Tommy's shoulder.

Tommy understands, gloomily, but he does. He almost considers pretending to *not* understand, but that feels too cruel after Wilbur had struggled so much.

"Yeah, I called Dream a god, so what?" Tommy huffs. "For all intensing purposes, he is."

Wilbur is distracted by his current path to question Tommy's mental health by Tommy slipping up and Wilbur being unable to correct him. It's almost painful. Wilbur can't *not* tell him. He grabs Tommy's hand.

“Intents? The fuck does that mean?”

Wilbur rolls his eyes, forced to elaborate.

“And purp— purposes, got it, intents and purposes. I cannot fucking believe you struggling through all that to tell me I fumbled my words. Dickhead,” Tommy pouts. *“Come on, then,”* he prepares to pull Wilbur toward the doorway, but once more Wilbur stops him, pointing to the scar. *“I’m not gonna argue with you, Wil, especially when you can’t even properly argue back. Dream is god, and we’re gonna kill him,”* Tommy nods resolutely like that settles the matter.

Wilbur hesitates, still uneasy about Tommy’s declaration, but intending on killing Dream feels like a relatively good sign, so he allows Tommy to put his arm around him and pull him toward the doorway.

“Fuck, you’re as starved as me, why’re you so heavy?” Tommy huffs, leaning Wilbur against the wall on one side of the doorway, their faces more brightly illuminated by flickering red light. Wilbur stares at Tommy, that awful worried sadness in his eyes that only a big brother can have. He taps the back of his own neck, nodding to Tommy.

Tommy frowns. He doesn’t know what to tell him. The numbness comes and goes with how much he moves, sure, right now, Tommy cannot feel his hands at all, and he’s finding it hard to move them, but maybe that will fade. Tommy almost wants to lie, to tell him something neutral. He can’t.

“I dunno, Wil,” Tommy murmurs, *“but I’m pretty sure it’s not good,”* Tommy rests his forehead against the stone, already cold, but this almost soothes the headache forming, or at least replaces it with a different ache.

Wilbur sinks down against the wall, one knee tucked up, his injured leg still splayed out. Tommy isn’t paying attention at first, just staring emptily at the bricks, before he hears Wilbur’s frustrated whine, looking over to see his brother tearing at his own face, eyes streaming with tears and hands trembling as he continues to pull at the cord even as it causes blood to pour down his arms. Wilbur stops for a moment, breathing heavily, hitting his fist against the ground twice before he stills, shoulders shaking with whimpering, muffled sobs.

“Wil...” Tommy crouches down beside him, the angle sharpening the ache in the back of his neck. He doesn’t know what comfort he can offer. Tommy falls over, hitting the wall, startling himself. He pauses, briefly stunned as he tries to comprehend what happened. He can’t feel his right leg. Tommy’s trembling hand reaches up to the back of his neck as he remains collapsed against the wall. *“He really did a fuckin’ number on us, dinne’?”* Tommy murmurs.

Wilbur looks over at him, weary and pained. He nods.

Tommy nods too, the movement making him all the more aware of the tiny thing that is surely slowly destroying him, staring into the darkness of the room without really seeing it. *“We’re still gonna kill him, though. Just might take a few more tries.”*

Neither of them are prepared when that door opens, even more so when a fresh body is tossed into the water. Tommy and Wilbur both bolt up, attempting and barely succeeding to stand. Punz stares at the two of them, wide-eyed and furious, arms and legs bound and a gag in his mouth. Tommy and Wilbur both flinch when Dream places a hand on either of their shoulders.

“Okay, boys,” Dream sighs bracingly. “It’s time to see if this labrat is worth keeping, or if we should just throw it away!”

Chapter End Notes

CHAPTER SUMMARY:

(this will still mention the violence but it will not describe it!)

Tommy and Wilbur briefly talk in Limbo, Wilbur basically saying he doesn't know what Dream could do that would actually matter after everything. Punz has yet to appear. Wilbur is revived first and Tommy is alone for hours, still unable to find Punz.

Tommy is revived. Dream enacts his revenge. Wilbur's leg was broken and badly healed so he cannot run on it. Dream has also sewn his mouth shut. Dream puts the lodestone by Tommy's spine as he threatened to do. Tommy begins to experience mild numbness that he fears might be paralysis. Dream also carves a smiley face into Tommy's shoulder as retribution for breaking his mask. Tommy replies by biting Dream's ear off.

Dream leaves Tommy and Wilbur alone in the same cell, where they struggle to communicate, but their general goal remains to kill Dream. The chapter ends with Dream returning, throwing Punz, alive and a prisoner, into the cell, intending on deciding whether it's worth keeping Punz too.

End notes:

Originally I was just gonna write Punz off, but then I went "OMG you know what would be fun and morally compromising??" and you all will see the very much not fun results next chapter :D

Yeah, this whole Punz business has made this fic at least a chapter longer. I know I said we were getting closer to the end, but things change. You know how it is.

As for what I did to Wilbur and Tommy. I mean, Tommy's we all saw coming I would hope, as for Wilbur. Uh. Idk man I had to do something to him and the dude likes to talk. So.

Also the paralysis bit is like, not really from personal experience but almost. I have some bad scoliosis and the doctors gotta check and make sure it's not fucking with my spinal cord enough to paralyze me ^-^ (it's not really a problem now that I'm an adult though like it's chill) Oh! And for the deep scarring, also inspired by me! I've got some

nasty surgical scars that are very deep. Not a smiley face though lmao. Can't say I don't write from the heart <3

Chapter 35

Chapter Notes

CW: violence. much violence. the usual.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

All things considered, Punz looks fine. He's got a bloody nose and he's tied up tight, but no egregiously broken bones, he still has both his eyes. From what Tommy can see, he's doing great considering.

Tommy has a feeling that's about to change.

Dream strides down the steps, with a flourish placing a sea lantern on the ceiling, Tommy and Wilbur squint in the sudden blue light, contrasting the dull red of the redstone torch. Punz looks especially pale and washed out, the blood crusting around his nose almost grey, as he glares up at Dream, still struggling fruitlessly against the ropes.

"Honestly, I really don't think he's going to be worth it. I mean, even Wilbur is only useful because of how much he gets *you* to freak out, Tommy, and how much fun it is to see him freaking out about you too, I guess," Dream circles the room, looking back at the two of them, Punz at his feet, struggling to sit up until Dream forces him to stay down with a boot on his chest, like a hunter stamping a claim on a piece of game. Punz keeps struggling. Tommy almost wants to tell him to stop, that once Dream has put his foot down, struggling is only going to leave you with ribs bruised worse, but he doesn't say anything. He just watches Dream.

"I mean, come on," Dream continues, looking down at Punz with amusement. "He's just... he's *boring*, isn't he? He's always been boring, and he's been useless too for a while now. I don't really feel like playing with him, y'know?" Dream shrugs and finally steps off, stepping over Punz and back toward Wilbur and Tommy. "But like, it feels like this should be a group decision. Or at least, maybe I'll consult you. Well, at least Tommy. I don't think Wilbur can really give his two cents right now," Dream laughs. "So, what should we do to him?"

Tommy just stares at him, Wilbur as well, but no one moves.

"*Hello?* Come here, Tommy. Wilbur, you can keep being pathetic in the corner over there." Dream motions him forward. He doesn't move. Dream sighs. "What can you possibly gain by disobeying me at this point?" He snaps. Finally, he steps forward, grabbing Tommy's arm and dragging him down the steps into the main part of the room. Tommy almost trips over his own feet, left leg more dead weight than usual. "Alright, you stand here," Dream pushes him to one side of the room and goes back for Punz, dragging the man closer by his hair in a manner which leaves Tommy wincing sympathetically. Dream straightens, returning to

Tommy, putting an arm around his shoulder. “Now, Tommy. I’ll let you have first pick. If you could do whatever you wanted to Punz, if *we* could, what would you do, huh?”

Tommy’s shoulders hunch inward, trying to stop Dream from touching him, and all he can think to say is a murmured, “I don’t... I don’t know.”

“Come on, Tommy,” Dream holds on tighter. Tommy feels sick, like his touch burns him. Punz struggles to sit up, staring at the two of them warily, but he can’t say a word. “Think about it for me. What should we do to Punz? Hm? What would be *fair*?”

Tommy’s impulse is reactive and bitter. “I dunno. Burn metal onto his arm. Hold him down,” he mutters. “Or beat the shit out of him for trying to escape or whatever the fuck...”

“That’s more like it, Tommy!” Dream pats him on the back and finally lets go, stepping closer to Punz who struggles to move away from him. “Nothing like an eye for an eye, right?” Dream grabs Punz before he can wriggle out of reach, dragging him closer by the collar of his shirt. “What else, Tommy?”

“Shoot ‘im in the... in the leg so he can’t run.” Tommy feels old hurt rising. “Maybe... I dunno. Mostly he just didn’t do shit but let it happen, so. Maybe I should just sit here while you fuck him up,” Tommy scowls, staring at Punz with old loathing, Punz stares back annoyed and unashamed.

Dream laughs. “I guess that’s true, but I want you to... *participate*, alright? All this stuff you want to do to him, I’m all for it, but you’ve got to earn it.”

Dream, to Tommy’s surprise, cuts Punz loose.

Punz is an explosion of movement, he rips the gag out of his mouth the moment his wrists are free, pushing himself away from Dream. “You’re gonna get fucked over by this eventually, Dream. You know you will—”

“Just shut up, will you?” Dream sighs. “I *know* you want to attack me. Just, get it out of the way, so we can get to the next bit, okay?” Dream opens his arms, inviting an attack, and Tommy is irritably reminded of Punz gesturing to him the same way when Tommy had been out in the jungle armed only with a crossbow bolt. He has a feeling Punz won’t have the sense to take Tommy’s way out and attempt to kill himself first.

Punz stands at the back of the cell and makes the mistake of looking over at the exit.

“*Oh?* Are you gonna run for it, huh? Do you *really* think you can get past me, get to your enderchest, chug that water breathing potion, start swimming, and *swim to the surface* before I can shoot you down? Go on. Try it. How about this—If you make it as far as to get in the water, I won’t stop you,” Dream bows aside, gesturing to the open door.

Punz glances from him to the exit, gearing himself up, and Tommy realizes with an ounce of pity that he’s actually planning on trying it. Tommy processes many things at once when Punz bolts for the door.

Punz has a water breathing potion in his Enderchest.

If he makes it far enough to take it now, and Dream catches him as Tommy knows he will, then it is wasted.

Therefore, as Punz runs past, Tommy sticks his leg out. It's numb enough it doesn't hurt when Punz trips over it and hits the ground hard. Punz looks up at him sharply, actually offended. Tommy just shrugs.

Dream cackles. "Holy *shit*. Nice one, Tommy! That's like, actually exactly what I wanted you to do." Dream rummages through his inventory, returning with a wooden sword, more like a stick or a club. Tommy briefly wonders if Dream has gotten tired of hurting his knuckles when he beats the shit out of him and had looked for other solutions. Instead, Dream offers it to him. Tommy stares at it like it might bite him. "Tommy, either you do this, or I do something bad to you and Wilbur, okay? It's not a hard choice. You're *right* that Punz deserves this." He offers it more insistently.

Tommy finally takes it.

Punz has assessed the scene and is very much aware how this turns out for him. "What the fuck are you trying to do? That's in no way fair. If you're looking for a fight, at least make it even," Punz sounds so indignant for a prisoner.

Dream gives him a look. "Yeah, Punz. You're not really the important part here. So, just shut up and take it, will you?"

Punz clearly wants to protest again, but he knows well enough it's useless, so he just sits up, squares his shoulders, and stares at Tommy, waiting. Dream steps back. He waits, but Tommy doesn't move and nor does Punz.

"Tommy, did you not get the message? I feel like it's pretty clear what you're supposed to do," Dream gestures from Tommy to Punz. Still, his captive audience is unreactive. "Fine," he sighs. "How about this. Just hit him *one time*, and then if you want to, you can stop. One hit, Tommy. One hit, or I hurt you instead. Or I break Wilbur's leg again, how about that?"

Tommy grimaces sympathetically, but Dream's ultimatum is clear.

Tommy stares at Punz, who stares back with indignation. Expression daring him to make a move. Tommy doesn't know how Punz can expect him not to act, but even as he stares back, almost apologetic but nonetheless willing, Punz still looks like he doesn't expect Tommy to do it.

It's perhaps too easy to step forward, to raise the club and bring it down on Punz's arm, which he holds over his head in an attempt to defend himself. There's a dull *thud* of wood against flesh, but Tommy is too weak at first to do more than bruise. Punz, realizing with bitter understanding that Tommy can and *will* hurt him, is quick to get to his feet. Tommy, more on impulse than choice, sees Punz start to stand and brings the club down across his back. Punz hits the water with a splash. He starts to stand again and Tommy's stomach is fluttering with anxiety and almost something awfully like giddiness as he steps down on

Punz's back to stop him from standing, forcing his head back under the water. He's too weak to keep him down for long, but that moment of frantic struggle, of Punz fighting for air because of *him*, it feels almost like relief. Tommy doesn't have the capacity left for guilt, to question if this is something he should do. There is only the kind of rage that comes purely from brutal, helpless pain, and being handed a target he can actually reach.

Punz finally manages to knock Tommy back, Tommy stumbling but keeping his footing. The moment Punz stands enough that Tommy can see his shocked, even frightened expression, he swings the club across Punz's face. *That* is hard enough to do some real damage, a sickening *crack* from Punz's already bloodied nose.

"Why d'you look so surprised?" Tommy snaps. He pretends there isn't a tremor in his voice. "You didn't mind dishing it out, eh? Don't tell me you thought I'd be *nicer* than you were?" Tommy desperately wants a reaction.

Punz merely tries to crack his nose back into place, badly, and instead steps back, gesturing with a sardonic bow, inviting Tommy forward. There's blood pouring down his face now, his eyes streaming.

"You should try harder, Tommy," Punz says mockingly, his voice sounds thick and uneven from his bloodied nose, the words painful. Not painful enough.

Tommy could scream with frustration that Punz is so awfully, cruelly unafraid. He remembers the terror. How could he forget it? Punz turning so sharply from distaste at violence to hitting him and hitting him and *hitting him*, over and over again, and Tommy hadn't known if begging was even an option because Punz had never done anything like that before.

Punz could at least have the courtesy to flinch away, Punz who could have gotten them out of this a long time ago, Punz who could have never sided with Dream to begin with, Punz who should have taken one fucking look at Tommy after he was first rescued and realized that this wasn't worth it.

"You're a fucking coward!" Tommy screams at him, bringing the club down again, intent on breaking bone, and from the sound Punz's collarbone just made, he might have succeeded. Punz falls back once more with a gasp of pain, one hand going to his shoulder, but he still manages to stand, he still looks pissed off rather than afraid. Tommy will *make* him understand what it means to no longer expect mercy from someone. Next time, Punz won't get back up.

Wilbur is having a difficult time. At first his primary concern had been for Tommy's safety, and while that's certainly not off the table, he's more so agonizing about the fact that Tommy is, as per usual, acting with his heart rather than thinking it through. Wilbur is still forcibly mute and he knows right now isn't a good time to attempt miming things, considering Tommy's furious focus seems set on beating Punz into the floor, therefore, that leaves him only one option.

Punz makes the mistake of trying to grab the bat from Tommy's hands instead of protecting his head and his vital organs as Tommy would have done, so instead the man is rewarded

with at least one broken finger, cursing and stepping back and impulsively cradling his hand, and holy *fuck* is that satisfying. Tommy remembers curling up on the ground, already terrified and wounded and Punz stomping down on Tommy's hand until he screamed.

"How's it fucking feel, you stupid piece of shit?!" Tommy snarls. He's weak and utterly emaciated, he has a feeling if he keeps going like this he's going to black out, but right now he can't bring himself to stop. He's entirely forgotten Dream's promise that he was allowed to stop after one hit, just as Dream knew he would. Punz lunges forward as if to tackle Tommy, but Tommy is already moving again, another swing hitting the side of Punz's skull, not enough that he loses consciousness but he's back on the ground. Tommy is standing over him. He doesn't have any Netherite boots to break Punz's ribs, but it's still easy to swing down at any part of Punz his bat can reach. He thinks he might kill him. He *wants* to kill him. Not like it matters either way. There's blood pounding in his ears. Tommy's hands are hurting. His vision is fuzzy around the edges and he's so out of it at first he doesn't realize what's wrong with Wilbur screaming his name.

"Tommy! Tommy, please stop it! You have to stop!"

Tommy stops, chest heaving as he struggles raggedly to breathe, he turns to Wilbur but somehow in a second of clarity, the image of Punz curled in on himself and bleeding feels pressed onto his eyes, still, he looks bewilderedly at his brother. Wilbur is on his feet, face drenched in fresh blood, thread still stuck through his lower lip. His voice sounds wrong, hoarse and weak and muddled by blood far worse than that of a broken nose.

Tommy stares at him, bat now hanging at his side. He gestures vaguely to the room like a kid caught playing with something he shouldn't have, too casual considering the way he's trembling, the mania driving him to vicious violence drained away into something so small, so childish. "...what?"

At which point, Punz tackles him to the ground.

Whatever power he had felt for the last minutes is drained away by fear so easily, struggling to move as Punz grabs his wrists and pins them to the ground to stop him from swinging again, all that control broken by a man simply knocking him off his feet. "Get off!" Tommy shouts, voice still shaky and closer to frustrated tears.

"Why, so you can fucking hit me again?!" Punz snaps, words slightly slurred, one eye red and bloody and swelling. His grip on Tommy's left wrist is weak, fingers bent and swollen and struggling to hold on. There's blood dripping onto Tommy's face from his nose and a split in his skin just above his ear. Tommy can't remember giving him that.

"No! Stop fucking around! *Both of you dickheads look at me right now!*" Wilbur shouts at them both.

Tommy listens, and mostly out of baffled confusion, Punz does as well.

"*He* is fucking laughing at us!" Wilbur points accusingly at Dream with one hand, the other wiping at the blood dripping into his mouth. He spits onto the ground. "Tommy, *you have a fucking weapon*. There's three of us, there's one of him! Are we not at least going to *try*?"

Finally, suspended in silence, Tommy realizes what's changed, that this silence is the absence of something. Wilbur hadn't been exaggerating to prove a point. Dream had been laughing at them. He's not laughing anymore.

Punz gets off of him, slowly and painfully standing and to Tommy's surprise, offering him a hand up, not even looking at him. The one eye not yet swollen shut remains utterly focused on Dream. Tommy takes the offered hand, his other holding tightly to his club.

"Oh, come on now," Dream looks utterly unafraid, he still dares to look *amused*. "What're you gonna do with that, huh? Are you gonna *kill me*? With that bat? You gotta hit me?" Dream gestures grandly to himself in all his Netherite glory. "Better make it count."

Tommy doesn't know what it is about having two other people able to help him. They're all weak and beaten bloody or otherwise half incapacitated, but none of them are tied down, they can all walk and have at least one unbroken hand left for violence. And certainly none of them have anything left to lose.

Dream doesn't even get out his sword. He doesn't put on his helmet, he just waits, smiling like an old school teacher who can't wait for his students to catch on to this harsh lesson. He's probably right. Tommy still wants to try and get one good swing at Dream's head first.

Punz, naive and unbroken as he is, he goes first. He throws himself against Dream, clearly trying to knock him to the ground so Tommy can get at him with his bat but he instead recoils, blood welling up across his skin from a dozen holes now stabbed in his shoulder where he had made contact trying to bodycheck him.

"*Thorns?*" Tommy scowls. "That's fuckin' cheap, you dickhead!"

"Oh, well, forgive me, Tommy for wanting an upgrade considering your newfound bravery," Dream says mockingly. He bounces back on his heels, looking at the three of them, waiting for someone to move. "Huh? Still feel like giving it a shot, boys? I'm *waiting*."

Tommy wishes his anger were enough. If the way he hated this man could be made into a weapon, Dream would be turned to ash at his feet. Instead, all he has is this bat. Tommy screams and swings at the man's head, Dream raising one arm lazily to stop him. The impact of the wood against Netherite shudders up his arm painfully. It's more than that, the pain rises from the holes now littering his hands, trailing up his arms. It doesn't matter, if there is one thing Dream has taught him time and time again, pain *doesn't matter*. Tommy swings again.

Wilbur stumbles forward to help, grabbing one of Dream's arms even as doing so tears holes through his own.

"Punz! Get the other!" Wilbur grunts, straining to hold on even as he's pierced open by unforgiving magic.

Punz winces on his own behalf and grabs Dream's other arm. Dream tries to shake them off. He seems surprised to find the thorns aren't enough to get them to let go, they're getting stabbed over and over by the enchantment and they *still* hold on just as tightly. He hadn't

expected he'd have to actually fight them off, and now Tommy is bringing that wooden bat down on his unprotected face.

Tommy ignores the fresh smattering of holes, Dream had jerked away just in time for Tommy to hit his shoulder plate instead of his face, and gears up for another swing. Wilbur and Punz struggle to hold on, skin torn apart more and more every second, their arms no longer merely punctured but gouged, deeper than skin, now the magic is forced to brutalize tissue.

"Hold him fucking steady!" Tommy rasps. He swings again. Wilbur and Punz are unable to heed his instruction, as Dream instead jolts forward, his skull not struck by a bat, but instead slamming against Tommy's, sending the boy reeling to the floor, nausea joining his blurred vision. The movement tore the pinpricks of the thorns open into deep gashes on Wilbur and Punz's arms. It's enough that Dream can make them let go, Wilbur's bad leg giving out underneath him and Punz collapsing for any number of head trauma or broken bone related reasons.

"That's enough," Dream *finally* sounds effected, breathless and irritated, but far from afraid, surrounded by his reckoning in three exhausted and bloodied captives. "It's not fun anymore."

"R-Right, 'cause we're really worried about you having *fun*..." Wilbur mumbles through bloodied lips. The thorns have made a grid of holes on his cheek as well as the deep lines cut across his arms.

Dream replies with a sharp kick to Wilbur's chest, sending him flat on his back. Dream leans down, hissing with their hard won anger. "I thought I finally got you to *shut up*, Wilbur."

Wilbur very dearly wants to make a sharp retort, but breathing is currently sending stabbing pain through his chest, so he decides to let this one go. His mouth hurts. Actually, at this point *everything* hurts.

Tommy should be down for the count. The floor feels as if it's dipping and shifting beneath him, if he opens his mouth he knows he's going to puke bile, but he looks down at his right hand and he's still holding the bat, so he still tries to stand. He would've preferred his last attempts to have made it far enough to try to hit him, but Tommy gets to his knees, puts one foot flat on the ground, and promptly falls over, the bat finally clattering into the water with a splash. He can't feel his hands, nor his legs, and his torso feels oddly tingly which he takes to be a bad sign. His fresh injury courtesy of Dream made his head jolt back, bending his spine in a way not meant to be impeded by a stone so close to bone. It's getting worse now. He has a feeling soon it'll be enough that he stops breathing.

"It was a good attempt, lads. See you all in Limbo..." Tommy murmurs. He closes his eyes. They're all drenched in the cold saltwater. Tommy feels like he should be shivering but he isn't. Tommy opens his eyes again and returns to coherency feebly at the sound of a crossbow being fired. He glances from Dream to where he had aimed and is met by Punz's dead eyes. He's unbothered by the sight, and he's almost bothered by that fact, but not really. He's too tired.

“I don’t think he’s worth keeping, and at this point, you two don’t get a vote,” Dream huffs irritably. He grabs Punz by the arm and drags him toward the stairs. Tommy tries to follow them with his eyes, but soon they’re out of sight, the dull *thud* of Punz’s body being dragged up the steps continues until finally, the cell door shuts. Tommy has a feeling they won’t be seeing Punz any time soon.

“Tommy?” Wilbur drags himself through the water slowly and painfully to his brother’s side. “Tommy, I can talk now, see?” Wilbur gestures to his own bloody mouth. “You’re still with me, yeah?”

“Not dead yet...” Tommy mutters. “Just... really really tired. And... numb. Lots of numb.”

Wilbur croaks out a laugh. “Yeah, I’d expect you would be. I am...” he grimaces, “certainly not that. It’s nothing but hurting over here in *casa de Soot*.”

“Yeah, casa-day Innit is full of hurting too. Hurting and numb. You can have both, funny enough,” Tommy says as brightly as he can manage. He closes his eyes again. Wilbur doesn’t try to make him stay conscious. Dying would only be a good thing for them at this point, it would at least offer some relief.

Wilbur nods. “We... we gave it a good shot, right?” Talking is agonizing still, but it’s better than being silent again, it’s a preferable agony. “At least we... we pissed him off. Like you said, we can always go again. A... a dozen more times—less, actually! I’d say five more times, we wear him down and *really* kick his ass.”

Tommy would laugh if his chest didn’t feel so funny. He wants to reply, but he’s finding it hard to inhale. All witty comments have left his mind, and now there is only the painful reminder of the damage being done to him even now. What he wants to say now is far less optimistic. “*I’m really scared, Wil. I’m scared I’m gonna die and coming back won’t fix it this time. I want you to hold my hand but I don’t think I can feel it.*” He can’t say any of that. He can’t take a breath. The blackness on the edge of his vision grows, but he’d like to think, unbeknownst to him, that his brother is holding his hand.

Chapter End Notes

This fic... might end up having as many chapters as tddd?? there's only one or two left, maybe I'll make it two just so it's even, but wow! This fic was not supposed to be this long or this plot heavy lmao it was supposed to be a few ominous scenes that diverged from tddd but here we are! I've graduated from college now, (wtf) but thank you all for being patient!

Also, Punz is gone now. Like for realsies. RIP I guess <3

Chapter 36

Chapter Notes

CW: Drowning, surgical horror (lodestone stuff), violence, gore, um. more gore/violence relating to the thorns enchantment. How do I put this gently. Biting with the intent to mutilate. Sure let's go with that.

It's a lot but I promise this violence is a lil more fun! ^-^

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tommy is alone in Limbo but only for a few hours. Those hours are almost restful. He can feel again, and he's grown incredibly numb to the pins and needles of Limbo. He almost feels normal. An easy baseline of pain, and feeling in all of his limbs. Tommy, well versed by now, ends up on his floor of polished obsidian and sits up sharply, his hand goes to the back of his neck. He can't feel it. Maybe it didn't carry over. He's not numb, and sure he couldn't feel it from the surface while alive either, but maybe.

It's like when you get shot. Arrows don't carry over now, do they? Limbo knows it's a weapon, it's a wound meant to kill you eventually. Maybe that means when you come back it will be gone.

"Fucking optimistic of you, Tommy..." He mutters gloomily. Tommy sighs, eyes closed, focusing on the fact that he can feel. Doing so is still not quite right, a disconnect when he isn't even sure if he has a body. He remembers Punz could be here as well. He could try to find him, but he doesn't really see a point. It sounds like Dream plans on leaving him dead, and it's not like Punz is much use to them here in Limbo.

He and Wilbur have a plan, though. A plan of sorts, at least. They kill Dream. They keep going, and keep trying, until they can keep him down. It's simple and nonetheless near impossible. It's not like they have anything better to do. He tries to recall what Wilbur's injuries had been. There's every chance his brother could join him soon. His body had been littered with holes from the thorns enchantment—a new development which will make their efforts to kill Dream suck even worse—so surely he'll bleed out and join him. That would be nice. The two of them could have a little bit of peace together without the torments of mortal bodies.

Tommy probably jinxed himself by getting hopeful.

"Wake up."

Tommy might have thought resurrection would get old by now, but there are still ways to return that remain freshly horrifying. Tommy gets his wish. Whatever deep magic brings them back deems the tracker in his neck to be a weapon, a threat, relevant to his fatality. As

such, Tommy breathes again, half inhaling water, and is immediately struck by fresh pain. He feels his flesh ripped open by his own tissue growing and pushing the lodestone out of the wound. It likely only takes seconds, but it feels like it takes forever for the lodestone to finally pierce the outer skin of his neck. Tommy doesn't scream, he just takes desperate, sputtering breaths, laying on his side and therefore half under water, swallowed up both by pain and relief that the lodestone is gone *and* he can still feel.

Holy shit you actually got lucky for once. Thank fuck.

His relief is short lived. He focuses on his surroundings to see Dream crouching down behind him. Tommy jolts away, head spinning as he processes, at least able to sit up and therefore breathe properly. He has a chain around his wrist, the room is washed in the blue light of the sea lantern, the same cell he and Wilbur had been left in prior. He can feel again. He wishes he could take more comfort in that. Dream grabs the bloodied lodestone from the ground.

"Huh. That's a shame," Dream tosses it in his hand.

Tommy realizes Wilbur is sitting against the opposite wall, still bloody and unhealed considering his lack of dying, but Tommy assumes Wilbur will be on the same page as him. The length of chain seems to have some give, Dream could still be in reach. Tommy clings to the wall behind him and tries to stand. He looks at Wilbur, who gets to his feet as well. Tommy doesn't see Wilbur is shaking his head at him frantically until he's already throwing himself at Dream. He tries to wrap his arms around Dream's throat, to pull him to the ground, but the chain he thought was long enough instead kills his momentum, and out of the corner of his eye he sees Wilbur slam back into the stone bricks with a weary *oof*. Tommy tries to piece it together in his resurrection-addled brain; by then Dream has stepped further back out of reach, yet *again* laughing at them.

"Tommy, use your *eyes*, will you? Look," Dream nods to the chain. Tommy blearily traces it, it goes up through a ring against the wall, another across the ceiling, and another on Wilbur's wall across from him. He and his brother are, elaborately, chained together. One of them cannot move away from the wall without dragging the other back.

"We're... We're gonna kill you," Tommy still says raggedly.

Dream laughs with amusement far too genuine. "Right, right sure you are," Dream scoffs. He's still tossing the lodestone from hand to hand, mulling it over. "Wilbur is still pretty bloody. I don't think I'm going to bother sewing his lips shut again, not until he at least dies and comes back. I dunno," Dream shrugs, "depends on how much of a hassle it'll be." He glances back at Wilbur. "*And* whether or not Wilbur has learned to keep his fucking mouth shut in my presence."

"Don't you... don't you f-fucking dare. Y-You said he could *heal*," Tommy is torn between pleading and fury. He's still struggling to get used to being alive again, the lodestone digging out of him really made things feel hazy.

"Yeah," Dream waves him off. "I don't know why you expect me to stay true to my word *especially* when you guys decided to try to *attack* me, even if it was fucking pathetic."

Dream's fist closes around the lodestone, eyeing Tommy with mild interest. "You, however, Tommy, are all healed up, huh?" He leans forward, patronizing like he's praising a dog.

Tommy doesn't say anything, merely presses himself further back into the wall, muscles so tense it hurts. It hadn't been intentional, but in doing so, he's given Wilbur all the reach he can. His brother won't waste the opportunity. Tommy feels his wrist get jerked up until it gets caught painfully on the loop of metal against the wall, but even then, Wilbur doesn't have enough reach to properly get to Dream. He sure tries though. His feet slip out from under him when the chain draws taut, but it seems he expected that, because just barely, he manages to kick out enough to nail Dream in the back of his knees before he hits the ground, so Dream's legs give out beneath him and he, rather pathetically, trips forward to the ground, arms fumbling to catch himself.

Tommy laughs, barking and hoarse. Wilbur has knocked the wind out of himself in his fall, and possibly cracked a rib if he's being honest, but he's smiling like he would laugh too if he could.

Dream scrambles to his feet, embarrassment and rage especially evident in his flushed cheeks without a mask to hide behind.

"What was the point of that, huh?! You can't *get to me*, Wilbur. You're not even doing a good job of trying!"

"Psh," Wilbur manages to make that one sound and waves him off, still laying on the ground.

Dream, to his credit, is quite good at getting a reaction out of him, though. He responds to Wilbur's dismissal by resuming his original course toward Tommy, grabbing him by the hair before he can even try to stand. Tommy feels like his wrist might break as Wilbur responds by staggering to his feet and trying to get to him, but he sees that all it does is pull on Tommy's wrist so sharply he cries out in pain and Wilbur is forced to back away until there's enough give that Tommy doesn't break something. Dream holds on tightly to Tommy's shoulder, forcing him to lean forward. "Y'know what, I'm just gonna be quicker about this, so, probably higher risk, but hey, worst case scenario it kills you and apparently revival takes it back out! So, what do you have to worry about, really?"

Tommy feels cold metal brush against his neck and tries to pull free even as it means Dream's hold is all the more painful. "Don't fucking touch me!" Tommy shouts hoarsely, grabbing Dream's hand on his shoulder, trying to shove him away, turning in his grip so Dream can no longer reach the back of his neck. Dream sighs irritably, sounding more inconvenienced than anything as he continues to hold on tightly.

"Get the fuck off of me!" Tommy snarls, trying to elbow Dream in the gut, but he only hits netherite and sends pain shuddering up his own arm. Tommy reaches back and locks his fingers over the back of his own neck, realizing he has no chance of fighting Dream off, he'll at least get in the way.

"Tommy, what're you trying to *do*?" Dream tuts him, going to pry Tommy's fingers off. Dream is irritated to find Tommy's feeble grip is desperate enough that Dream cannot break it with one hand, so he lets go, attempting to pull his hands away with both of his own. The

moment Dream is only holding onto his wrists, Tommy yanks his own hands forward until Dream's forehead collides with the back of his skull in such a way that it surely incurred some brain damage to them both.

Dream stumbles back, "*fuck!*" He covers his forehead, clearly pained, and maybe Tommy gets to think he did something for a moment, but it doesn't last beyond that moment. "You're doing *nothing*, you stupid, selfish brat!"

Tommy tries to duck away when Dream goes to grab him again, but it just means instead of Dream holding him by his hair, his boot nails Tommy in the back until Dream can push him to the ground, his knee digging into Tommy's spine. Tommy's face is under the water. He cannot breathe let alone scream when he feels a blade once more dig into his neck. Dream does so with far less precision, his cutting far more vicious and rapid and reckless as he *digs*. All the while, Tommy cannot breathe, he's inhaling salt and it burns his nose and his throat and he's thrashing wildly, trying to get above the surface, trying to shake Dream *off* of him, and nonetheless it is futile. His lungs ache, his neck burns, and all of it is building worse and worse to a fever pitch of agony as he feels Dream's thumb dig into the wound he's cut as he returns the lodestone to its place. Tommy's lungs are an almost merciful distraction from that vile, unnatural feeling of stone digging behind tissue and bone, the pain less consistent, more scattered by the piercing agony of the corners of the lodestone scraping against tissue. Dream is no longer acting with surgical precision, instead a child butchering paper with craft scissors. Dream pulls Tommy out of the water, holding onto him by the back of his neck, putting pressure on the open wound, keeping the lodestone in place; Tommy inhales raggedly, salt water pouring from his nose, burning as he coughs and gags up what's still dampening his lungs.

Dream holds him at arm's length by his scruff to avoid getting hit by salt and bile, giving Tommy a condescending, almost pitying look. "Breathe, Tommy. You're not allowed to die without my say-so," Dream only pauses long enough that Tommy is forced to stay conscious, desperate, shuddering inhales and choked, gasping exhales that he thought would have gotten easier by now. He doesn't know how many more times he'll have to drown for it to no longer startle him. Dream turns Tommy around so he can once more assess the wound, holding him in place by the throat and Tommy is distracted from his struggles to catch his breath by a new, more *tugging* surface pain in his neck. He reaches back with fumbling, desperate fingers, but Dream is undissuaded, pausing only long enough to step on the chain around one of Tommy's wrists, he catches the other in his left hand, his arm remains wrapped around Tommy's throat. He resumes his work unimpeded despite Tommy's best efforts. Tommy focuses on the pain and it begins to take shape in his mind, the sharpness, followed by the pull against his ripped flesh, followed by the pinching sting of something tugging through the wound. It's a needle threading. This time, Dream isn't bothering with health potions, merely sewing the wound up with the same thread he'd used on Wilbur.

Tommy still tries, struggling feebly to pull Dream's hand from his throat followed by reaching back to try and push Dream's other hand and needle from the wound, but Dream's hold is secure enough that it is a waste of precious energy, his efforts as irritating as a gnat.

Tommy gasps when Dream finally lets go, he hits the water with a splash, sharply sitting up as the salt stings his nose once more. Tommy, no longer held in place, scrambles to put some

distance between Dream and himself. By his and Wilbur's shared plan, Tommy should be trying to tear Dream to pieces right now; the man is still within reach, but Tommy cannot bring himself to do anything but hunch back against the wall and pray Dream walks away. His neck aches deeply.

Dream stands, cleaning the blood from the needle on his sleeve. "There! All better, right? No harm done," he says brightly, as if he'd repaired a toy Tommy broke.

Tommy doesn't say anything. One trembling hand reaches to the back of his neck, pulling away quickly as brushing against the messy sewing sends sharp pain fizzling across his skin. It's going to paralyze him again, he knows it will. It seems Dream is still dead set on redoing his work. Tommy had struggled as hard as he could and it had done *nothing*. Maybe that should dissuade him, instead Tommy is aware with weary, weighted pain, that his fear does nothing. There is no way to avoid harm, even if his body still obeys that impulse to cower away. So he buries it, taking a few deep breaths as he tries to force a few last vestiges of strength forward, enough that he can stand.

"W-Wil?" Tommy says hoarsely, nodding to the wall behind his brother.

Tommy isn't even sure if he's audible, or if his speaking his brother's name just sounded like a raw, feeble croak, but Wilbur catches on immediately, backing up so Tommy has as much chain as he can manage.

Dream is actually within reach this time.

Tommy wraps the chain around the man's neck, using his little body weight to drag him back to the floor. It works for about three seconds before Dream pries the chain from his neck and flips Tommy over his shoulder. Tommy slams back to the ground, breathless and his spine stinging horribly.

"That was fucking pathetic," Dream snaps. He punctuates his frustrations by sharply kicking Tommy in the ribs.

Through the haze of pain Tommy briefly considers trying again. He doesn't think he could get back up if he tried. Already, his efforts had been flimsy at best, his limbs shaking, his grip on the chain weak, so much so he almost wonders if he let go in the end, before Dream threw him to the ground, because holding on had been so *hard*. His muscles feel tingly and wrong.

Dream takes a few steps back, like he knows given the chance Tommy *would* have tried again. He looks from Wilbur to Tommy, both of them clearly beaten down, weakened and weary, but it's undeniable. Even now, Dream is gauging for a threat. Dream does not bother with getting in the last word, or threats they know he will back up with blood, instead, he merely turns and storms off, frustrated and annoyed, and however satisfying that is, it doesn't do anything to change their predicament.

Tommy slowly, painfully drags himself toward the wall, leaning back against it, wincing as his head sends sharp pain from the back of his skull, just from brushing against the bricks. Tommy clears his throat, the act burns horribly of salt and bile.

“Wil? You... you haven’t said much. You still with me? He didn’t sew you up again, yeah?” Tommy stares blearily over at his brother.

Wilbur glances warily from him to the door. Wilbur opens his mouth to reply, and pauses.

“What?” Tommy asks.

Wilbur hesitates for another moment, leaning forward, still glancing at the door. “He said if I talked he’d... he’d do that again.”

Tommy scowls. “Well, if you don’t fuckin’ talk you’ve done his job for him, haven’t you?”

Wilbur looks unpersuaded.

“And I think he said if you talked in his fuckin’ *presence*,” Tommy scoffs. “I think with you and me you’re good.”

Wilbur seems to take this more to heart. He moves forward, clearly wanting to go sit beside his brother, but he hears the scraping of the chain and is reminded that doing so is only going to harm his brother further. He sits back.

“I’m sorry I didn’t try to help you,” Wilbur says softly.

“How the fuck were you supposed to *help* me?” Tommy’s eyebrows furrow together. “You can’t do shit, it’s *by design*, see?” He waves his chained hand irritably even as it jostles painfully against his bones. A pause, both of them exhausted. “What happened to Punz, d’you suppose?”

Wilbur shrugs. “I dunno, he didn’t say,” he says sarcastically.

Tommy sighs, staring up at the sea lantern in the ceiling. It’s sort of pretty, the way the light shimmers through the links in the chain.

“Our kill god plan is coming along pretty slow, ay?” Tommy says dully.

“Yeah. A bit.”

Tommy laughs weakly. “Did you see his face, though? When you... when you kicked him?”

Wilbur grins. “You should’ve seen how surprised the prick looked when you headbutted him. He looked goddamn *scandalized*,” Wilbur laughs.

A pause, laughter fading as both of them once more catalogue the many aches and pains of their broken down bodies. Tommy closes his eyes and swallows thickly. He’s not surprised by thirst anymore.

“Hey, Wil?”

“Yeah?”

Tommy pauses, just because he doesn't want his voice to shake. It works, his words come out steady. "I'm tired." Wilbur doesn't reply at first, so Tommy opens one eye to squint over at him, smiling with something awfully, wearily like acceptance.

Wilbur attempts to smile back, but he looks far closer to crying. "Yeah. I know. Me too."

Tommy nods, before stopping with a wince as his head pounds and his neck stings. They don't have any righteous anger left. There is no more room for *this isn't fair, we've suffered too much, how dare the universe allow this to happen, how dare a man like Dream exist, or we deserve so much more.*

They've known all of these things to be true, but it doesn't mean anything. Not really. Righteous anger has never freed them. There is no logic left, no even questioning of Dream's morality, as if that man even exists on a scale human enough to warrant morality. They're merely saplings battered in a rainstorm. A torrential, unstoppable weight putting an ever growing pressure onto something not made to endure like this. There is no way to shame the rain into stopping, just as there is no reason for that wood to bend and then break under a weight it has not grown to bear when it could have just as well survived. There's no reason that this time, it finally broke; no reason any more than a reason for Tommy to not allow himself to think about the fact that the last time he saw his best friend he didn't hug him goodbye because he was scared that would make Tubbo understand enough to save him. Maybe that's not quite right. At least a broken sapling could grow again, it could die and feed something else. Down here, their bodies will never feed anything, even in that hazy dream of them one day being able to properly rest. They've been entombed since the beginning.

Tommy should have stopped thinking about home by now. There is nothing to be gained by it besides inflicting the one pain Dream has no power over onto himself.

"Do you think—" Tommy stops himself, both voice breaking as he gets choked up and regrets bringing the thought so close to the surface in the first place.

"What?" Wilbur hasn't fallen into a similar pattern. He'd not only spent over a decade adjusting to the idea of his own absence, of how unfathomable their lives must be, even with glimpses from Ghostbur, but he also doesn't believe that world was meant for him, not for a long time now. He certainly hasn't made peace with his lot, but he's more consumed by the thought that the one good thing he had ever done in his life and un-life had been save Tommy, and he hadn't even managed that.

Tommy doesn't see a point in not saying it any more than he sees a point in saying it, but speaking sort of almost distracts him from the pinching pain of his spine, so he does. "I dunno if... I doubt Tubbo would've shown you, but... did you ever see the note I gave him?"

Wilbur frowns, shaking his head, utterly thrown off by the subject matter. Tommy talking about home feels like he might as well be talking about the familiarity of the stars. It's too untouchable. "I don't... I don't remember there ever being a note, or anything like that. But yeah, he probably just... didn't show me."

Tommy nods, once more staring up at the soft blue light of the lantern. He cannot consider the thought that Tubbo never read it. “In it, I told him that... that until he gives up and lets me go, he’s allowed to keep searching for me, for *us*, one day a week, ay?” He glances over at his brother once more and is almost annoyed by the confused misery in his blood-stained expression. He doesn’t bother chastizing him for it, merely resumes his focus on the light glittering through the links in the chain across the ceiling. If there were a way for him to ignore the rest of the light, that row of pinpricks might have looked almost like stars. “I was gonna say, d’you think he listened? I mean, he had to, I was the one dying, right? Dying wishes and all that?”

Wilbur nods and bites his lip to keep it from trembling even as it sharpens the ache from the unhealed holes covering them. He mulls over a reply. He doesn’t know how to answer Tommy’s question, even as he knows there are no good answers so the debate is useless, nonetheless. Instead, he continues to stare at the water on the floor, the way it has stilled enough to almost be a perfect mirror of the ceiling. “What day of the week d’you think he’d pick?” Wilbur hears Tommy exhale a laugh and a smile flickers in reply, but he continues to stare at the water, eyes glazed as he fixates on the tiny ripples from the two of them shifting in little, imperceptible ways. He cannot go near his brother, but every time he shifts, Wilbur watches the ripples cross the room toward him. When Tommy doesn’t reply, he continues. “Feels like a Sunday sort of event, I think. Get it out of the way before he starts the week. Sunday morning, he’d... he’d probably get in a boat, right? He knew that much. Go sailing...” Wilbur laughs again. “Bet he packed snacks, got himself some sandwiches, so he wouldn’t have to stop until evening. That’s Tubbo for you, definitely isn’t a quitter.”

“You’re totally right on the snacks,” Tommy finally replies and Wilbur is able to feel relief that Tommy allows these lighter thoughts to slip through the cracks. “But I think Tommy-day is more of a Tuesday event. If Tubbo is still the president, of...” Tommy almost loses it, reminded like an old knife twisted, that L’Manberg had once more been destroyed by Dream. Once more an unfeeling, unreasonable matter of chance is that Punz never thought to tell Tommy how often Dream had lied to him. Tommy’s only hope now is that it seems Dream has given up on going back to hurt their family. “If... if Tubbo still has a job, I doubt it’s a Monday-Friday nine to five type deal. That was never his style, when he had a choice, anyway. So. I think Tuesday. Y’know. Him and Ranboo could have tacos after.”

“Yeah. Taco-Tommy-Tuesday.”

Tommy cackles, barking and especially hoarse but nonetheless delighted. “Um, I think you mean Tommy-taco-Tuesday. I trump tacos, *obviously*.” That gets another laugh out of Wilbur. It still feels nice to make his brother laugh.

Wilbur glances back at the wooden boards in the corner of the cell. He’d probably do better sitting there out of the damp. He glances up at the chain. He thinks it will reach, enough for both of them to sit somewhere more dry. “Come on. We’re gonna get fuckin’ trench-foot if we don’t move a little.” Wilbur’s broken and then badly unbroken leg twinges painfully as he drags himself over to the platform. He sees Tommy wearily do the same, he feels it too, the slight tug of motion on the chain. Wilbur almost complains about Dream’s fresh elaborate design to keep Wilbur and Tommy apart. They can move, but they literally cannot move closer together. He doesn’t see a purpose in pointing out a cruel fact they both are

abundantly aware of. Wilbur wishes he still had his coat. He could have balled it up and tossed it over to him, but of course he doesn't have his coat, so instead they're both left shivering. Dream had also taken the bread and water from them. After Tommy had died, Wilbur had sat beside his body, unable to see a point in moving away, holding his hand until the water made his corpse cool rapidly enough that Wilbur couldn't stand how lifeless he was anymore. Then Dream had returned, and Wilbur wishes he could say he'd tried something, *anything*, but he hadn't. He'd just sat there, somehow still feeling protective of Tommy's corpse. Not that that had mattered. Wilbur had tried to protest when Dream began to drag Tommy's body away from him, but he'd been stopped so easily by Dream sharply pausing to grab Wilbur and cover his mouth with his hand, holding his jaw shut and giving too calm a warning, *"if you say another word, you know what I'll have to do, right? So just shut up."*

And Wilbur had. Dream had expected enough fight from Wilbur to chain his wrist first, up through the loop against the wall, then through the ceiling, and back down to the opposite wall, and finally to Tommy. Wilbur doesn't know if he would've ever worked up the strength to try, chained or not. By the time his sluggish, exhausted thoughts had processed that this would ensure he couldn't go near Tommy, he'd been well past the point of resistance, if such a point ever existed.

Tommy brings him back to the present, voice quiet, almost embarrassed like a child afraid of the dark. "I know staying awake won't... it won't make us any safer when he... when he comes back, but I dunno," Tommy glances over at the door. "I don't wanna be asleep when he gets here."

"I'll stay up," Wilbur offers immediately.

Tommy gives him a wry look. "Right, Wilbur, you never were the most vigilant, even *before* Pogtopia made your brain all scrambly."

"Yeah, well, you neither, Tommyinnit. I caught you napping on watch more than once."

"Hey, I was tired from all the hard work I was doing! I was a fuckin' war hero!" Tommy pouts.

Wilbur gives him a look, exasperated and undeniably fond. "Maybe we should both just admit Tubbo and Eret were doing all the legwork back then."

"Psh. Fundy definitely wasn't."

"Yeah, he took after his old man like that," Wilbur laughs dryly. A pause, Tommy still seeming set on staying up. "You're tired, man. I'll stay up. If I start to drift, I'll dunk my head in the water, how about that?"

Tommy snorts, but Wilbur feels a spark of pride when Tommy finally lays on his side, his back to the wall, half curled into a ball. "Fine, good luck with that, this water tastes fucking *rank*," and with that last ominous thought, Tommy shuts his eyes.

Wilbur has nothing to distract him from his pain anymore, so he might as well channel it into something of possible use. He stares ruefully down at the manacle around his wrist,

experimentally trying to push it over his thumb with his other hand. He'd definitely have to break something, which doesn't necessarily mean it's off the table. He leans down toward the corner of the wooden platform, moving to wedge the sharpest part between the last link and the cuff, but the rattle of the chain gets him to look up and see that reaching that far will definitely tug on Tommy. Wilbur hesitates, torn briefly between a foolhardy and overall useless attempt to unchain himself, and allowing Tommy sleep just a shred more restful. It's not much of a debate. Wilbur sits back against the wall. It's actually been a long time since he's last fallen prey to his old habit, something he feels vaguely proud of, but in his mind, he lays out a game of solitaire. He knows there's a near infinite amount of possible games, but he thinks he must have memorized at least a few dozen of the variations that happened to come up more than once in his dead deck.

It's a semi-suitable distraction, but not good enough to stop his spiraling, especially when Tommy had opened a door he had left closed for so long. While he had briefly been free, he'd heard kind things about Eret, everyone saying that they had changed, but Wilbur had been too caught up in his own woes to really talk to them about things. He would've liked that, he thinks. He never saw Fundy while he was there either, but from what he heard, Fundy wanted nothing to do with any of them. Not that he blamed him.

He got to see Niki. In the end. She hadn't forgiven him in any way, nor would he ever expect that of her, but she'd at least looked at him, she'd given him tolerant words, and hopefully could move on with her life knowing how sorry he was, knowing that he understands the hurt he caused, even if he can never make up for it. Wilbur feels an old ache in his chest, one that had been there for so long, he'd almost forgotten it, but for the first time in a long time it makes itself known.

Oh. I miss my family.

Wilbur laughs softly under his breath and the sea lantern's glow blurs in his vision. He wipes away tears and fleetingly wonders how he has enough water left for them, but that doesn't dampen the thought growing louder, a notion that he knows has never left him, but he can't remember the last time that missing, that longing, had taken him by the hand and tried to drag him uselessly back to the sun.

This thought, this particular wound, it's not meant for Phil nor the sword he put through his chest, although Wilbur does truly still love and miss his dad, this missing of family nestles comfortably, specifically, heavily, outside of the Camarvan, between blackstone walls dotted with bright, proud yellow. It blurs, two times touching that maybe should be divided by war and heartbreak and endings, but they don't. It's Fundy and Tubbo and Tommy, it's also Eret, it's also Niki and Jack.

It never existed. Not all together, not like that, but maybe if Wilbur believed in life after death— *life* after death, not *limbo* after death—he'd hope it would look something like that. He's so far past deserve, not even a matter of him believing he does somehow deserve that, nor the opposite, but it simply doesn't matter. He'd just like it, he thinks. It sounds nice. They would sleep under the stars, Wilbur would play his guitar, Niki would bake, Jack would find it worth staying, Eret wouldn't give up on them, Tommy, Tubbo, and Fundy would play

in the river again, and there would never come a day where armor was needed within their walls because they would fight with their words instead.

Maybe once, maybe not long ago, that last thought would have made him scorn himself for being so naive, but not now. Right now, Wilbur looks back on that man with a philosophy full of faith and pride and trust, and he loves him.

He looks across the room at Tommy, and from the slowness of his breathing, his little brother has managed to find sleep. *It's you and me. We're all the family I've got left. Maybe that means something.*

"Not enough..." he murmurs. He doesn't allow himself to close his eyes, fearing he'll fall prey to exhaustion. He tries to focus on the door at the top of the stairs. "Not enough."

Wilbur keeps awake. He's quite proud of himself for that fact, up until he hears the cell door open and he's struggling to stand. He needs to wake Tommy *right now*, but he's still, admittedly, regrettably, *so* fucking scared to speak in front of Dream. So he does the next thing he can think of and tugs on the chain until Tommy's wrist moves, his little brother waking with a start of common adrenaline, scrambling to sit up.

Dream returns with renewed vigor. Wilbur doesn't mind, nor does it make him any more nervous, merely he thinks that arrogance might be usable. Even without sleep, Wilbur had gotten a modicum of rest. His injuries had finally scabbed over properly and he'd hope his body managed to recoup somewhat from the blood-loss, even without food or water.

Dream stares between the two of them, bouncing back on his heels and smiling. "Hello, boys." Neither of them speak, they just watch him, both of them thinking the same thing and certainly not bothering to listen to Dream's words, only stare, instead utterly focused on when Dream will be in reach.

Dream continues, ignorant to his absent audience. "I've noticed a *trend* of insubordination in the ranks as of late. I think it's time I fix that. Now," Dream puts a hand to his chest, nodding courteously to them. "I'm to blame most of all, right? I gave you two too much freedom, too much *control* of yourselves. And we both know you can't be trusted with that, right?" Dream laughs. "Not to mention, letting Punz continue to lurk after he'd worn out his use was also a mistake of mine, see? I'm *honest*, I'm owning up to my mistakes," he says it with belittling sarcasm, as if endeared by the thought of himself in all his godliness committing some error. He begins his next error, meandering toward Wilbur. Wilbur remains slumped against the wall, standing, but sure to give the illusion of passivity, of cowering; he's wired like a spring and out of the corner of his eye he sees Tommy back up the moment Dream chooses a direction, giving Wilbur as much reach as he can, and Wilbur measures up the exact distance he can get, he waits, those few seconds for Dream to get closer. "And now it's my job to *fix* them—"

Bingo.

Wilbur holds the length of chain in his unbound wrist and loops it around the back of Dream's neck, pulling him sharply downward until his face collides with Wilbur's raised and waiting knee. Wilbur winces when he feels his knee get split open on the edge of Dream's

helmet, but it's irrelevant, not worth noticing, just as the holes that had finally started to scab with dried blood are reopened by the Thorns. That pain blends with the burn of his aching, struggling muscles and *still* none of that matters. Dream is quick and strong, as per usual, recovering rapidly and standing. He's gotten his sword out, ready to slash across Wilbur's abdomen but Tommy, in a fervor of excitement rather than fear, sees an opportunity and yanks sharply on his end of the chain, dragging Wilbur closer to Dream and probably into harm's way, but they both know that also doesn't matter, because more importantly it yanks the chain into a closed loop around Dream's neck. Wilbur catches on and begins to tug his end so the chain tightens.

"Yes!" Tommy shouts with vicious joy, he hasn't even noticed that his role meant the Thorns started to bite into his hands too. He screams with something awfully like giddy delight, "kill him! *Kill him!*"

Dream does not react in the right way. He does not scramble to pull the chain away from his neck, instead he slashes his sword forward without hesitation. He chooses harm before instinctive self-preservation and annoyingly, that works. It doesn't take much, Wilbur's body goes limp, blood and viscera pouring free but Wilbur is still dead weight, he still pulls on the chain even in death so Dream is still left floundering to free himself from the chain as Tommy, not even blinking at his brother's opened corpse, continues to pull on the chain with all of his waning strength and bloodied arms so Dream is yanked forward alongside Wilbur's body and pinned to the wall. Dream likely could have pried the chain off against Tommy's strength, but even more annoying, he's *clever*. He sees Wilbur's dead wrist get scraped open against the loop of metal and, one hand still struggling to stop Tommy from fully cinching his head from his shoulders, unlocks Wilbur's wrist with the other. Tommy's feverish strength is turned against him, the chain suddenly going slack and sending him back against the stone wall with all of his own force, knocking the wind out of himself. He's lucky only in that the pain remains primarily on his spine, he didn't hit his head so for now he remains conscious and while hurt, still far from dissuaded. Tommy's shoulder blades protest achingly as he uses one hand to force himself off the ground, at most maybe distracted by that pain alongside the blood still dripping from the holes spattered across his arms.

Dream is gasping for breath, eyes wide with fury, yes, but also undeniably amazement. His neck is not only a deep, violent red sure to purple, but it's bloody as well, the chain tight enough that the pinching of the links tore skin. Even with his brother's brutalized corpse slumped over at Dream's feet, Tommy grins at the sight.

Dream is, stunningly, still capable of speech, however hoarse and ragged. "Y-You both will—" His voice breaks, but he keeps going, despite the damage it's surely exacerbating, yet again choosing possible harm, possible *control*, over self preservation. "Regret this. W-Wilbur gets fixed—" Another pathetic break in his voice, enough that his haughty expression turns to frustration. "*Gets fixed first,*" he forces the words out with clear pain.

Tommy is, in a sense, free. Dream had made the loops of metal along the wall wide enough for the cuff to slip through, designed with pain in mind so that if one brother tugged too far the other would begin to break their wrist against the loop, instead, Tommy runs toward the exit, chain rattling more and more freely to follow him, running not to flee, but rather he

stands at the bottom of the steps, eyes wide and manic, blood soaked arms visibly trembling as he holds the length of chain like a weapon.

“Fucking take him then,” Tommy spits viciously. “Come here!”

Tommy thinks going mad is the best thing he and Wilbur have done thus far, because despite all the pain, all the threats and fear beaten into him *over and over and over* again, Tommy is so overcome by eagerness, he cannot even wait for Dream to come to him with Wilbur’s corpse in tow, so much does he need to draw blood that Tommy *steps forward*. Just the once, just *one* step closer, but Dream sees it, undeniably he does. He sees his most docile, broken prisoner step forward like he cannot *wait* to get his hands on him.

Dream, to his credit, despite the clear, baffled unease in his eyes, continues to pretend logic still exists down here, to think that his starved, weak prisoner will be unable to stop him, strong in his netherite armor. Dream moves forward like logic means he will be able to shove Tommy aside, which isn’t wrong, as he *does* shove him aside without trouble. Tommy tries once more to get the chain around his neck and Dream catches it from the air easily, holding Tommy aloft by his wrist. And he naively thinks that will be the end of it. He is still stronger than Tommy, he can still hold this pathetic skeleton of a boy by his wrist. Tommy doesn’t immediately start kicking and clawing from the air, so Dream assumes that when he throws Tommy against the stone bricks he won’t get back up. He takes two more steps and then he hears a dubiously human snarl and bloodied, bony arms are clawing around his neck, digging in, trying to tear open the wounds started by the chains.

Dream *knows* the Thorns enchantment is working, but he doesn’t think Tommy does, because Dream goes to flip Tommy over his shoulder as he had before, but Tommy hangs on like doing so doesn’t cause him extreme pain. Dream got him to stop holding onto his neck easily, but Tommy scrambles to cling to the edge of Dream’s chestplate, anything to stop him from letting go even as every brush with Dream’s armor is another dozen thick, invisible needles piercing and shredding his skin. Tommy uses the leverage of the chestplate currently making his fingers more holes than flesh to lunge forward. Tommy feels more holes opening in his cheeks, on his tongue, even his gums, as he bites down on Dream’s nose. If he had a shred of rationale to spare, maybe he would think on how this is certainly not the killing blow they’re looking for, but right now in all of his animal animosity, Tommy just knows it’s something his teeth can reach.

Dream screams, pain and genuine, *fantastic* fear evident as Tommy unwaveringly, enthusiastically, tears open his face. Dream almost goes to shove Tommy away, but seems to stop when he realizes with awful horror that doing so would only help Tommy separate his nose from his face, so instead he grabs onto Tommy’s mouth, one hand prying open his lower jaw, the other pulling his teeth away. Again, Dream certainly has the strength, by every right he should have the upper hand, still the *real* trick is pulling his hands back before Tommy can take off a finger. He gets lucky, after escaping with his fingers intact he slaps Tommy away hard enough his ears ring and Dream actually *runs from him*. Sadly, not for the hall beyond the cell wherein Tommy could give chase, but back. Tommy catches on to what he’s doing but still struggles to pursue him, even as Dream lunges forward and grabs onto the other length of chain, pulling it frantically, blood pouring down his face, pain almost blinding, until Tommy is inevitably dragged back to his side of the cell.

Tommy at first in his yearning for blood keeps pulling against the chain, but even he calms to some extent, standing there against the back wall, ignoring the pain of his wrist threatening to break from Dream putting an excessive and nonetheless justified amount of strength into holding him back. There is a pause, Tommy and Dream staring at each other.

Tommy is covered in blood, some of it his, some of it Dream's, some of it probably Wilbur's too. Tommy is trembling, chest heaving, heart pounding in his ears, and so much of him is bleeding from what must be a hundred little holes from the Thorns, his cheeks and mouth especially gruesome, even more so when Tommy *smiles* at him. One wrist held to the wall, he raises his left hand, having to point at Dream with his middle finger.

Words distorted and slurred by his damaged tongue, but nonetheless the message rings clear. "Fuck did I say? *We're gonna kill you!*" A whimpering, bubbling laugh dribbles out with the blood, devolving into cackles that leave his aching ribs protesting until he collapses back against the wall. "*We're gonna kill you!*" A mangled scream echoing off the walls.

Dream doesn't take his eyes off of him, moving carefully along the wall, still holding onto the chain, until he can grab Wilbur's corpse again. Only then does Dream dare to look away. Tommy, if he were a bit more cognizant at this point, would see that Dream's hands are unsteady as he re-cuffs Wilbur's corpse, Wilbur's bony wrist the only thing he can think of to hold the chain in place while he gets the fuck *out of there*, and all the while, he can still hear Tommy's cackling, which, with the amount of blood in his mouth sounds more like choking but nonetheless there are undeniably those words, they remain as Dream leaves, even after the cell door closes, they continue in a lilting jeer:

"We're gonna fucking kill you!"

Tommy is left alone to his hysteria for what must be hours, but he blacks out from the blood loss, and then later dies, soon after his fight. It is Dream who must take this time to recover. He drinks a health potion, he resets his more than broken nose, he drinks *another* health potion, he rests, he fashions himself a new mask, and he tries not to think too hard about it. Tommy almost took his nose off. Both brothers dead, neither get the satisfaction of Dream returning to the cell with a crossbow raised, firing a bolt on impulse so it pierces Tommy's already unmoving chest. Even after that, Dream still pauses, as if half expecting Tommy to get up and start swinging.

Certain his prey is dead—although that word feels almost inane now—he resumes his original task. He'll separate them. That's what will fix this. He is of course having a harder time controlling two lab rats instead of one, never mind he disemboweled Wilbur rather early into that scuffle, so surely once they are both separated and chained down, he will be able to manage them just fine.

They are *nothing*. What is a rat to a *god*? Dream scowls, vindictive as he hauls the bodies out of the room. Health potions or not, it makes his nose hurt.

~

In the dark, and soon after in that hollow train station, joyous reunions.

Wilbur is pacing and worried, as is his default, and is more than a little startled when he turns and is toppled by his brother tackling him into a hug, he vaguely registers Tommy's delighted tone as he shouts, "*Wil!*" before they're both tumbling to the ground.

"Tommy?!" Wilbur says, baffled. He lets Tommy pull him back to his feet so he can hug him properly. "You're— You're dead!"

"I— What? Yes! Yeah, I am dead, but that's not important," Tommy is talking a mile a minute, pulling back from the hug so he can move more freely, talking with his hands. "He can feel fear! *And* pain! He can feel fucking *pain*, Wil!" Tommy laughs. "Oh, he is *so* fucked!"

"You're—" Wilbur is struggling to process. "Uh, don't take this as a criticism, but we failed. He's alive, *we're* dead."

"Psh, *semantics*, Wilbur!" Tommy waves him off.

"I don't think you know what that means."

"It doesn't *matter!*" Tommy is actually bouncing in place. "He's fuckin' shaking in his green little bitch boy boots!" He finally pauses and allows a brief shred of sobriety, nothing his brother's hesitation. "And, are you still good? Right? *We kill Dream.*" Tommy says it with the intention of a prayer and a promise.

"R-Right, Tommy, that's the plan, but..." Wilbur doesn't know what to make of this. He almost wants to be happy with Tommy, but he also has a nagging feeling that this is a bad sign, that there will be lasting consequences.

Who is he kidding? There's no such thing as lasting consequences for them anymore. Death doesn't even stick.

"Yeah, right. Fuck it," Wilbur grins. "We kill him."

Tommy nods adamantly. "We kill him! Right, right I bet you anything he's gonna separate us, but that's fine, alright? We go at 'im every chance we get, and he'll... he'll probably put us in the same room when he gets desperate and tries to like, hurt one of us to make the other fall in line, but we *don't do that*, right?" Tommy says sharply. "I won't do it without knowing for sure from you, but as for me, if he's got me, if he's hurting me, *you don't fucking stop*. Whatever I say, 'cause I probably won't be rational at this point, don't listen. We don't stop trying until he's dead on the ground."

Wilbur nods. "The same for me. Whatever he does to me, you keep going." Wilbur means it, but his only doubt is whether his conviction will hold when inevitably, Tommy will be begging for the pain to stop and Wilbur will know he cannot actually get to Dream, so the only logical choice would be to obey.

Tommy grins, he's ascended above logic, it seems. "That's the spirit, ey, General?" He claps Wilbur on the shoulder.

Wilbur has a funny feeling in his stomach, like he's skipped a stair. Maybe Tommy had jokingly called him *Mr. President* in the last decade or so, but he certainly hadn't called him General, and just as he had longed for home, a more grim piece of nostalgia rises up. *At war again, huh? It's about time.*

Wilbur smiles, and he almost means it when he gives Tommy an appraising look and says, tone light and teasing and maybe a tad too genuine, "well done, soldier! Lost the battle, but win the war, am I right, gentlemen?" *Gentlemen* plural slips out too easily, too quick a habit, even as it just the two of them alone, but Tommy doesn't bat an eye.

"The L'Manberg way!"

Wilbur has an irritating voice in the back of his head reminding him that their track record says otherwise. Usually, it goes like this. They win the battle, they lose the war, because someone couldn't take it, someone got weak, someone betrayed them, and it is with that grim realization that Wilbur understands that he will *have* to let Dream hurt Tommy. This only works—if it works at all—if they both refuse to yield, no matter the cost.

So Wilbur keeps up his smile, the same weary facade he wore during his presidency, and gives his right hand man a nod. "The L'Manberg way."

Chapter End Notes

Aha this fic has somehow gotten longer! We're lookin' at ~40 chapters.

Anyway. If you like this fic, you probably like/would like genloss. So. [I have a fic for that.](#)

Chapter 37

Chapter Notes

CW: broken bones. self harm. description of injuries. torture. just flat out torture, alright idk what to tell you.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Wilbur is revived before him, but this time it doesn't make Tommy nervous, maybe anxious with anticipation, because he knows his role in this. It feels good to have a cause again, regardless of its sanity. When Tommy too is brought back to the world of the living, he is not dissuaded by his new cell, alone and empty save for the chains on either wrist keeping him back from where Dream stands in the doorway, wearing a new mask. Probably to keep Tommy from getting to his nose again. Tommy does wince, a ragged gasp of pain as yet again the lodestone is removed by the resurrection. He almost finds it intriguing, that the lodestone was considered a weapon regardless of whether or not it was his cause of death, but the thought feels like something Dream would write down in his stupid fucking notebook, so he lets it pass, and instead begins to fight against the chains, his pain tolerance a frightening thing as he doesn't even blink when his wrists begin to bleed.

Dream clings to his authority relatively well all things considered. He doesn't even step back. "If you *ever* want to see your brother again, you're going to learn to behave."

Tommy has turned around to tug more forcefully on the chains, all but ignoring Dream, and instead, almost carelessly he replies over his shoulder, one word that unnerves Dream perhaps more than Tommy intent on breaking his own thumbs to get free. Tommy replies to his ultimatum offhandedly. "No."

And Dream still keeps it together, hesitating for a moment, he probably looks startled behind that new mask, but it's not like Tommy is even looking at him. "You'll change your mind. I am going to fix Wilbur, and you. I've trained you before, I can do it again."

Tommy's focus is still largely on getting the cuff around his left wrist over his thumb. He's hoping maybe the missing finger will make it easier for him to push it out of place, but he's still present enough to continue casually over his shoulder, unafraid. "Um, okay?" He scoffs, before crying out in pain more out of instinct than actual feeling. His left wrist is free. His thumb is not where it should be.

"What the *fuck?!?*" Dream sounds vaguely horrified, but it seems he had prepared for some nonsense, because while Tommy is still focused on tugging his right wrist loose as well, he gets out his crossbow and shoots Tommy in the head. Dream is for a moment frozen. He'll have to figure out a better way to contain Tommy, then.

What's better than fucking chaining him to a wall?

Dream could leave him locked in the cell, but he needs him contained within the cell as well if he has any hope of going inside, at least until he gets Tommy afraid again. Otherwise, Tommy will definitely ambush him. Dream leaves this problem for later, the bloody lodestone all but forgotten, and goes down the hall to the other cell. Surely Wilbur is fresher, so he'll cling to enough sanity to not... do *that*.

Arguably, he does.

Wilbur is resurrected with a gasp, staring at his surroundings, tugging against the chains with a reasonable amount of not-bone-breaking effort. Dream tries his spiel again.

"If you ever want to see your brother again, Wilbur. You're going to learn how to behave."

Wilbur frowns, but at least he doesn't *disagree* like Tommy had. Wilbur continues to assess his surroundings, sitting up and turning back to look at the length of chain, knowing well it's not enough to reach Dream.

"I'm *talking to you*, Wilbur," Dream is annoyed to find he is once more being ignored. "Did you think you'd have like, a trial period before the *behaving* thing started? Do I need to break something to get you to fucking *listen*?"

At these words, Wilbur does turn back to face him, getting to his feet with far too much purpose for a man chained to a wall. Dream realizes, with an uneasy irritation, upon hearing Dream threatening to harm him, he'd prepared for Dream to get close enough for him to try to attack him.

Maybe Dream should've made these chains shorter, but they're *already* shorter.

Dream also realizes another reason why this captive is remaining frustratingly silent. "Oh, you're allowed to talk right now, Wilbur. My *speak when spoken to* policy is currently in effect." He does cling to a bit of smug pride that that threat has continued to hold.

Wilbur nods, almost appreciative. He smiles. "That's alright. I don't need to see Tommy right now. It won't matter."

Dream can't help but bite back, transparently defensive. "Oh, really? Why's that?"

Wilbur leans forward, as if to share a secret, and Dream knows better than to lean in too. Still, Wilbur is perfectly audible, a dramatic false whisper.

"Cause I'll probably see him anyway. After we kill you."

Dream steps back. He knows the two of them can talk while dead, he knows they've been alone together enough to discuss it, but nonetheless, Wilbur repeating Tommy's commandment with utter certainty, all on his own. Dream feels, quite logically, like he's being surrounded.

Without real reason other than weary annoyance—and undeniably a hint of unease—Dream raises his crossbow and shoots Wilbur in the throat. Even as Wilbur begins to drown in his blood, once more forcibly silenced, it's like Dream can hear him speaking those words through murky brown eyes staring him down: *we're gonna kill you*.

So it goes, and whatever bloodshed is sure to come, their singular, shared goal remains to kill Dream at any and all costs.

They become feral dogs.

Maybe that metaphor is a bit drastic, but Wilbur, particularly with his propensity for biting, finds it quite apt. Dream keeps them still chained, an even shorter chain now, too short to strangle him in the nigh impossible event they broke from the wall, but Dream cannot even attempt to get close without one of them lunging at him. Just like Dream, they are beyond reason or safety or care. It is, unspoken, mutually agreed upon that that beyond applies to each other as well, and Dream must know it too, because he has yet to use the brothers against each other. Wilbur thinks the man must be afraid it won't work.

Still, Dream tries again. This time, the brothers again wake up alone, chained down without any give so they cannot move more than a foot away from the wall, both wrists chained separately, again, so there's not enough to wrap around Dream's neck. In Tommy's case, he also keeps him behind a wall of iron bars, just to be sure. Dream is smug, comfortable going beyond the iron divide, thinking at least if Tommy starts to break free he'll have plenty of time to leave, until Tommy tries to kick him the moment he gets anywhere near him. Tommy can't actually do any damage this way, but the kid's fucking tenacity is enough that Dream once more shoots him in the head and doesn't bring him back until he's chained Tommy's ankles down too.

Tommy knows Dream must realize every step he takes radiates fear. Tommy, for that very reason, almost hopes he doesn't stop. Tommy likes using it to keep score. Every new defense, every new trap Dream puts in place, that's another round Tommy has won.

Eventually, Dream tries his *retraining* idea. He is less unnerved by Wilbur, so he starts there. It's honestly juvenile. He has Wilbur chained down, and every time he disobeys an order—largely the same order over and over of telling him to *stop trying to break free what are you an idiot you're just gonna break something and then I'll kill you!*—Wilbur is punished. First, Dream tries breaking his leg again. It works for the first thirty seconds, Wilbur distracted from his efforts by his own screams, tears streaming uncontrollably from his eyes, but then the adrenaline must set in, numbing him for the time being, because his next action is to break his own wrist, tearing his right arm free, poorly fumblingly, reaching out to grab Dream even as he cannot see him through tears and his other wrist remains bound. Maybe once the adrenaline crashed Wilbur would have been more pliant in his pain, but Dream is too irritated to have the patience for it, instead, another crossbow bolt to the skull.

So Dream thinks, rests, calculates, and goes back to Tommy. Tommy, who he had programmed so beautifully in the past, Tommy who had once not even needed a locked door to keep him obedient and pliant. Dream just needs to be consistent. He needs to push over and over again and not give in at the first sign of madness. Even rabid dogs fear water, and even the deranged dead must yield to pain eventually.

At least this time Tommy doesn't immediately break his wrist to get free, he just watches. Dream thinks there's something off about him, beyond how unnerving his gaze is. It takes him a moment to realize Tommy is swaying slightly, like he's struggling to stay upright. When did he last give them water again? It's probably been a few days, but to be fair, the last time he tried to give Wilbur water, Wilbur tried to bite his hand off.

"You're not gonna *kill me* if you black out from dehydration first," Dream says dryly from beyond the iron bars.

Even Tommy's smile is shaky. "You underestimate..." Tommy trails off before he gets to the *me* part but he doesn't seem to care.

"Right," Dream is unamused. "You and your brother have... really committed, I'll give you that. But I know you don't want to be separated and I have a feeling you'd be more comfortable, you know, not chained to a wall. So, I'd be willing to make a deal."

"Is your offer your own fucking head on a spike?"

"No."

"Not interested."

"Really?"

"Nope."

"So, you're not thirsty? You *don't* want me to give you water?"

"I never said *that*." Tommy leans his head back with a heavy sigh, eyes closed.

"Tommy? Are you listening to me?"

Tommy doesn't reply.

"Do you really expect me to believe you just *died* on me? Really?"

Nothing.

"You act like there aren't *consequences* anymore! I can still fucking hurt you!" Dream finally opens the iron door, crossing over to that side of the cell. Even if Tommy starts trying to break his wrists, Dream will at least be able to punch him in the side of the head before he breaks loose.

That is, unless Tommy's wrists are already broken.

Dream crosses the room and almost cannot process in the split second before Tommy lunges at him the fact that the kid yanks his swollen, bloody wrists through the chain without a shred of hesitation. But at that point, Tommy is dead set on biting him in the throat.

It is, arguably, easy to manage.

Dream is startled, but willpower or not, Tommy is still a starved teenager who wasn't exactly strong to begin with. Dream pulls him away before he can sink his teeth in. To say that ease meant Dream wasn't utterly horrified would be inaccurate. Tommy yelps when Dream pins down his broken wrists, pinning him to the ground, but even then, he's trying to kick Dream off of him, he's trying to lean forward close enough to sink his teeth in.

Dream needs to put him down, he needs to handle this. He lets go of Tommy's left wrist to reach for a knife and Tommy immediately is pushing against his jaw as hard as he can, unable to snap the man's neck one handed, he sure is trying to do harm to his vertebrae. Dream fumbles blindly, finding a knife as his jaw aches from Tommy's bony fingers digging in. He swings blindly too, and it takes several slashes of the blade for Tommy to finally stop moving. Dream falls forward without Tommy pushing against him and is instead staring at a bloody face, three long gauges across it and a fourth on his throat that it seems finally made him stop moving. His eyes, glassy or not, still seem to be looking for a target.

Dream sits back, staring at Tommy in weary amazement. Unable to resist, he grabs Tommy's wrist. It's dark purple, especially on the muscle just below his thumb. It's so swollen, Dream doesn't understand how he shoved it through metal so quickly. Dream notes blood dotting the already dark bruising. It had swelled so much Tommy forcing it free had definitely broken skin, but there hadn't been a shred of hesitation. Like the pain hadn't even mattered.

The pain has to matter. Dream will *make* it matter.

~

Tommy is pleasantly surprised to stumble into his brother in Limbo, it tended to be a gamble on whether or not they would be dead together.

"Hello?!" Tommy shouts in as deep a voice as he can manage.

Wilbur jumps, before grinning at him and responding in turn, "hello?!"

"Hello?!"

"Hello?!"

"He- Right, actually, I don't want to get stuck doing that forever, so. *Anyways*," Tommy saunters over to him, hopping down to sit beside him, legs swinging over the tracks. "No luck on my end, I'm afraid. And every trick we try is one more thing he's gonna wise up to."

"Are you trying tricks?" Wilbur gives him a look. "I thought we were just winging it being as fucked up as we could manage."

"Well, that *too*, but that involves *tricks*, Wilbur. At least when you're a clever lad like *me*," Tommy says haughtily.

"Oh? What've you been doing? I broke my fucking wrist, like, for the third time. *After* he broke my leg."

“Psh!” Tommy waves him off. “Child’s play, brother dearest! You see, *I, preemptively*, broke *both* of my wrists, and *ripped ‘em out* the moment he went around the iron bars he put up in my cell. See, Wilbur, I am such a *spectacular* threat, he’s added iron bars to my cell! Has he added iron bars to *your* cell?”

Wilbur pouts, as if jealous. “No.”

“Aha!” Tommy waggles a finger at him. “Gonna have to try harder than that, then!”

Wilbur laughs, and then, as always, however hard they try, there is a lull. Tommy’s grin fades, even as he keeps kicking his feet over the tracks.

“So, he broke your leg, did he?”

“What? Oh, oh yeah, but that’s...” Wilbur tries to shrug him off, staring down at their feet. “That’s nothing new, though, is it?” Wilbur glances sideways at him. “What about you?”

Tommy shrugs. “Not a lot so far, actually.” He scoffs. “Tried to make a *deal*.”

“Yeah? What sort of deal?”

“Dunno, actually. I did not hear him out,” Tommy says aloofly. “Started flat out ignoring him, just to tempt him to come over, and of course, the dumb bitch did, and that’s when I got to try out my wrist trick!”

“Well, that’s good, then,” Wilbur tries. It’s unspoken. Tommy hasn’t seen the sort of harm Dream intends yet, and for them that unknown is far worse than a broken leg.

The silence speaks for itself, and Tommy breaks it as if in reply to a question. “I mean, we can keep this up, can’t we? What can the fucker do, eh?”

“Right, right what can he do?” Wilbur replies with a feebler enthusiasm.

“*Wake up.*”

It seems, Tommy is going to find out.

Tommy comes to, as he expected, chained down with even more excessiveness. He’s chained down to a table of some sort, he thinks. Chains, and rope, on his wrists and ankles as well as a loop of chain around his torso and neck. Tommy could break every bone in his body and he’d still be trapped. Tommy isn’t going to bother trying to get to Dream at this point, but he can certainly do his best to annoy the prick, which is almost just as good. Dream, once more behind a mask, still certainly doesn’t radiate enthusiasm from where he stands beside the table and stares at him.

“What now, Dr. Frankenstein? Or no, wait, who was the creepy fuck with the pit of despair in the Princess Bride? Fuckin’ *love* that movie, you’d fit in great in the pit of despair, you know, ‘course, you’ve got your *own* pit of despair going right here—”

Dream, as Tommy knew he would, snaps. A knife stabbed down into his left arm. Tommy screams, inhaling sharply, but again, from Dream, a little stabbing is like a slap on the wrist.

Tommy is still breathing a bit raggedly, adjusting to the feeling of metal splitting open muscles and sinew, but he can still talk just fine. “That... that does sting a little, you know. Really... really pulling out the big guns, huh?”

Dream’s annoyance is still obvious even with a mask. Tommy has learned to read it from his tense shoulders with ease. He watches him, not quite able to move his head enough to follow, as he goes to get something else. Tommy has a feeling it won’t just be a knife.

“Oh! You’ve gotten me a beverage! How kind. Thought you weren’t allowing us water anymore? Well, actually, a beverage is everything *but* water, did you know that? Are we allowed beverages?” Tommy knows his heart is beating faster when Dream returns with a glass bottle. He knows the tinged green liquid inside is definitely not something he wants to drink.

Tommy watches him take out the stopper and can only talk faster.

“You know, I don’t think I can do much drinking from there. And this is a bit cheap for you, isn’t it, Dream? Man can’t even afford to use an I.V., you’ve resorted to that toothpick of a knife, haven’t you-?” Tommy jumps, flinching violently against the vicious burn of whatever that substance is sinking into an open wound. Tommy feels cold sweat beading on his forehead. This is *not* going to be fun, but Tommy is going to get Dream to talk, he’s going to get him to whine like a little bitch, all the fucking while. “T-That, that does sting a little too. Bit like a bee sting, ay?” It’s *not* like a bee sting. “Oh! L-Lovely, you’re making it symmetrical! You know how much I appreciate some good symmetry Dre-” Tommy cuts himself off with a sharp inhale as Dream stabs another knife into his other arm. He clenches his jaw, eyes and mouth shut tightly to muffle a whine, but he refuses to stop. “W-Why the two cuts, though? D’you think your fancy beverage is gonna sting different on either s-side-*fuck*-” Tommy tries to pull away, more than aware it’s useless, as that same brutal burn begins to filter into his blood on that arm as well.

He talks faster.

“I’ll keep you updated, shall I? For your little diary! Or, no, they’re *lab notes*, right? You’re all *profesh*, like that, you know, like professional? Profesh! A-Actually, this doesn’t feel too different to when you welded hot metal to my skin! C-Classic sting, not *quite* as intense, though, is this helpful data for you? Actually, now that I think about it, I haven’t seen you writing in y-your diary much lately, you should start doing that again, Dream! Better f-for your mental health, and we all know you *definitely* fucking need help with that-”

“*What’s it gonna take for you to shut the fuck up?!*” Dream finally screams at him.

Tommy cackles, even as tears stream from his eyes as he gets his wish. “L-Last time you got pissed at me for not talking! Make up your mind, will you? O-Ow...” he gasps as the burn gets worse, Dream furiously pouring more poison onto the wound.

Dream grabs another knife, this time going right for Tommy's stomach, stabbing it through one of the links in the chain so every time Tommy moves it widens the wound. "Every time you keep fucking talking, I stab you again. And when you die, that doesn't mean the count starts over, it means you get brought back and have a lot of catching up to do before we keep going, *got it?*"

"Well, that's just impractical, really, eventually you'll bring me back just to stab me to death again—" Tommy screams when Dream puts another knife right through the palm of his hand, tears streaming and his frantic breathing definitely including some heaving sobs, but he doesn't stop talking. He laughs through his gasps. "Y-You know, do that three more times and I'll be just like Jesus—"

"*What the fuck?!*" Dream doesn't even stab him this time, just gestures furiously.

"Thought you'd... thought you'd like that idea, Dream! With your whole god complex, 'course that would make me your *son*, I guess, and there's no way in hell *that* can be a thing, I mean, you're right fucking ugly—"

"*Shut up!* Just shut up! Why won't you fucking shut up?!" Dream screams himself hoarse, sounding almost hysterical. Dream leaves the table, rummaging frantically in a chest.

"I would be absolutely *happy* to shut up, Dream, all you have to do is take one of those cute little knives of yours and shove it up your nose, alright? Then I will *gladly*—"

Dream takes the easy way out. He shoves a rag in Tommy's mouth, tying it on tightly, and from the way Dream is breathing rapidly, it seems like *he's* the one being poisoned. Finally with quiet, Dream's hands fumble to drip more poison into the wounds. Tommy's scream is muffled, eyes shut tightly as he hits his head back against the stone, anything to distract from the burn beginning to consume his whole body. Tommy adjusts, as he does to everything, and while he can't talk, he can still annoy Dream. Tommy begins to hum through the gag as loudly as possible. He'll start with the hits from *Moana* and see where that takes him.

Dream screams in frustration, pointing a vicious, accusing finger at the kid he has bleeding out on a table. "You can't keep this up forever! *Eventually* you're gonna get tired! The pain *has to do something!*"

Tommy just keeps humming, but he would have loved to give Dream a witty reply.

The pain did do something. It got us used to it.

So it follows.

And despite Dream's best efforts, Tommy doesn't break first. Sure, Tommy *breaks*, he had to at some point, after the third or fourth resurrection he stops humming or moving in general. Occasionally his chest will shudder with sobs, and depending on how close he is to dehydration or a recent resurrection there will be tears to join the blood on the table, but when Dream finally thinks he's had enough, when Tommy has done nothing but shake with sobs and struggle for hours, Dream asks him something.

“Do you want it to stop? I can save you, Tommy. I can make it stop, you just have to obey. So, do you want it to stop?”

Tommy’s eyes are tightly shut, but he slowly, painfully nods.

“There we go!” Dream croons patronizing and smug. “That wasn’t so hard, now, was it?” Dream begins to fix him a little, pouring milk onto this round of stab wounds, blood mixing poorly with it, and it soothes the burning from the outside, and that alone is substantial relief. As for curing what’s gotten into his blood, he’ll probably have to drink some.

When Dream next takes out the gag, Tommy takes several shuddering breaths, desperate, agonized exhaustion standing out vibrantly in his eyes, he looks over at Dream, and for a moment, Dream thinks he sees reverence. He thinks he sees a flicker of that version of Tommy that worshipped him. That shaky inhale, that little smile, surely it’s because Dream has once more offered him salvation.

“H-Had a lot of... a lot of time to think,” Tommy says hoarsely.

Dream, for a few foolish seconds, still takes this to be some revelation about devotion.

“Now that I’ve... Now that I’ve seen your face, it’s... it’s obvious why you wear that mask, it’s ‘cause you’re ugly as *shit*, eh?” Tommy makes a strange wheezing hum that might’ve been an attempt at a laugh. Tommy sees the way Dream’s shoulder’s sag, not even bothering to hit him or anything, and wonders if he keeps this up if he’ll be able to make Dream cry.

Dream does leave the room, Tommy would like to think to go cry in peace, but right now he’s more focused on his stab wounds. He’ll bleed out soon, surely. If Dream stays away for a bit, maybe he’ll have a moment of reprieve in Limbo. For all his pretenses and his uncanny ability to commit to a bit, Tommy never wants a repeat of the last hours again. He thinks there’s a fair chance they’ll continue or Dream will come up with something worse.

Dream does his best.

Dream doesn’t know who the weak link is anymore, not for mere pain, but there is one thing that has *always* worked. He knows it will.

Wilbur is dragged back into the fray for his one purpose, that is, his desperate vulnerability to Tommy. Wilbur knows what he agreed to, but somehow he wishes Tommy had had to do it first. That is, allow the other to be harmed.

Wilbur, bound tightly in chains so he can just barely shuffle down the corridor, Dream holding onto the back of his neck in such a way that he cannot attempt to bite him, is pulled into a room with his little brother cut open on a table. There’s blood that’s dripped off of it and pooled on the floors. Not all of it is fresh blood.

“Tommy?!” Wilbur knows he looks weak, he looks pale and desperate, and that’s because he is.

“Oh, he’s not with us, at the moment, Wilbur. And lucky him! He’s not been having much *fun* here! I thought maybe I could try again with an audience,” Dream says with furious, forceful cheer. He shoves Wilbur to his knees, locking his wrists to the wall, and Wilbur immediately tries to sit up more, craning his neck to keep an eye on Tommy. “Don’t worry, you’ll be able to see just fine in a second.”

Dream unchains Tommy’s corpse before dragging it to the floor, where Wilbur can now get a good look at the bloodied stab wounds littering his body. Tommy’s eyes are still open. Wilbur’s stomach churns. Dream sits Tommy up against the base of the table like he’s positioning a doll, rechainning him to either of the legs and binding his ankles together for good measure. Wilbur watches him get out the revivebook with weighted dread.

Tommy blinks blearily, head turning very slowly. “Oh... I’m off the table... yay...” He smiles. “Oh, hey, Wil! You... you been here long?”

“Not really, no,” Wilbur tries to smile back, but he thinks he might be sick. He hopes not, considering he hasn’t eaten in days.

“Shut up,” Dream tries to interrupt.

Tommy glances at him, all annoyance instead of fear. “We’ve been over this, *no*.” Tommy laughs raggedly.

“Right, Wilbur. I think it’s obvious how this is going to go. Either you give in, you beg for mercy, you swear to do *whatever I want*, or Tommy—”

“Hey, hey Wil,” Tommy cuts in, utterly not paying attention.

“Shut up!” Dream kicks him sharply. “Or Tommy—”

“Hey Wil, you see that table?”

“Tommy, shut the fuck up!”

“Yeah, I see it,” Wilbur grins crookedly, unable to resist wincing on his brother’s behalf when Dream kicks him again.

Tommy doesn’t even react beyond a flinch from the pain, still looking at Wilbur. “Pit of despair, eh? Whole room! It’s just like the... y’know, pit of despair...”

Dream storms off to one of his chests.

“The pit of despair?” Wilbur asks.

“Yeah. Princess Bride. Don’t tell me you don’t know Princess Bride. You’re old as shit, you should’ve seen it— No! No, can’t you see we’re having a conversation?” Tommy first leans away with Dream returns with a gag, but the moment Dream gets close enough he makes his best attempt at biting him. Dream is, sadly, too quick for Tommy to take a bite out of his hand. Tommy is still just looking at Wilbur, first raising his eyebrows, and then rolling his eyes as if to say *see what I have to put up with?*

Wilbur laughs.

“*Wilbur*,” Dream snaps.

Wilbur looks at him, eyes wide, a picture of innocence. “Hm? Yes, Dream?”

“Unless you’re begging for mercy on Tommy’s behalf, you keep your mouth shut.”

The corner of Wilbur’s lip twitches into a smirk that he halfheartedly tries to suppress. “Yes, Dream. Right, of course.”

Dream pulls out a knife already covered in Tommy’s blood. Wilbur’s eyes follow it, and the humor dies quickly. Tommy cries out, muffled as the blade is this time not embedded in his arm, but rather dragged down it. Tommy is breathing harder now, eyes shut tightly, but that doesn’t last. He forces them open, takes a deep, shaking breath and looks back at Wilbur. He rolls his eyes again.

Wilbur tries to smile again, it’s a bit harder now that blood has begun to flow. Wilbur is thrown off when Dream returns with a bottle, but from the way Tommy watches it warily, it’s not new to him. It’s *definitely* not a health potion.

“Oh, I thought there weren’t brewing stands allowed on the base, Dream?” Wilbur chastises him, hoping he can match Tommy’s bravado and irritate Dream as well, but Dream laughs softly.

“Well, considering our predicament, I thought this called for something special. I went above ground and made this just for you guys,” Dream is matching the dry sarcasm, as if Wilbur continuing to talk isn’t irritating him. Dream sighs. “I told you not to talk, Wilbur, and what did you just do?”

“I certainly didn’t tap dance.”

Dream holds onto the bottle more tightly, clearly his frustration growing as Wilbur does not respond to a threat as he should. He trails several drops down the wound and Wilbur can see the way Tommy’s muscles convulse alongside his muffled screams. He writhes against the chains, tears spilling over as he struggles to catch his breath.

Wilbur wants to tell Dream to stop, he wants to at least scream his brother’s name, but he doesn’t. He does as Tommy asked and he buries it. There’s nothing he can do about his horrified expression, but his refusal to plead has to count for something.

Tommy seems to settle somewhat, still trembling, skin not marred by blood shining with sweat, but he opens his eyes and looks at Wilbur as if trying to tell him he’s okay.

“Nothing to say, Wilbur?” Dream tries tauntingly, clearly smug at how pale Wilbur has gotten.

Wilbur doesn’t look away from Tommy, but he still replies. “Thought I wasn’t supposed to talk, Dream,” Wilbur swallows thickly, trying to stop his voice from sounding weak and

hoarse. Tommy nods as best he can, a hazy attempt at encouragement. “Make up your mind, will you?”

Dream doesn’t reply, clearly knowing his frustration will show more than it already has, he merely moves on to Tommy’s other arm. Tommy doesn’t look, staring at the ceiling and hitting his head back against the table, shutting his eyes and flinching inward when once more the knife trails down his arm.

“You’ve gotta realize, Wilbur, this isn’t something you’re gonna be able to endure,” Dream says thoughtfully as he holds the dropper over the new wound.

“What am I enduring exactly, Dream? I’m just sitting here, man,” Wilbur laughs, it cutting off with a feeble gasp when once more Tommy screams into the cloth in his mouth and tries to pull away even as the chains make his wrists bleed alongside his arms.

Dream waits for Tommy to stop thrashing to reply. “Yeah, but I know you think if you can just keep being snarky, if you make one more bold comment for every time I cut Tommy open, eventually I give up, right?” Dream laughs. “*Why* would I give up, though, when I *know* I can break you this way? I mean, right?”

Tommy stares at Dream, not Wilbur, with bitter, exhausted loathing, and Wilbur, with a pang of guilt, realizes it’s because Tommy thinks he’s right.

“Right?” Dream says again, patronizing in his cruelty. “I mean,” he laughs. “Do you *really* think you can watch your brother scream in agony for *hours* and just respond with... what, a *quip*?” He scoffs.

Wilbur swallows back his nausea. He doesn’t look at Dream, he looks at Tommy, and for all his doubts, Wilbur can see that Tommy is *asking* him to keep going.

“I mean... I’ve tried the begging for mercy part already. Just means you hurt him some other time, right?” Wilbur says quietly, and maybe Tommy’s pleading turning to pride makes him feel a little braver.

Dream keeps trying, leaning down so he’s in Wilbur’s face. “Yeah, but I’m *offering mercy*, aren’t I?” He hisses.

Wilbur glances at him dully. “And eventually, you take it away.”

“*Not* if you learn to *behave!*” Dream’s weak facade of calm snaps into rage.

At least Wilbur knows he’s doing something right. Over Dream’s shoulder, Wilbur sees Tommy struggle lift his chained wrists so he can flip him off, and Wilbur knows if he could, Tommy would be sticking his tongue out at him as well. Wilbur manages a laugh. Dream turns around sharply, but Tommy puts his hands down and looks at the ceiling and Wilbur can almost hear him whistling inconspicuously. Dream sighs, forcing his voice to return to calm.

“We keep going. We keep going until you beg me to stop.”

Wilbur doesn't give in, not in that sense, but Dream is good to his word. Tommy gets no rest in death, Dream brings him back the moment he registers Tommy has stopped twitching. Wilbur stops talking. He does not beg for mercy on his brother's behalf, but he cannot bring himself to look away as if ignoring his brother's suffering. So he can only watch, and bite back every plea he wants to offer. He tried to keep talking to Tommy, but it has shifted from some desperate version of joking with him into some rather mindless babbling, so he decides it's not worth it.

Dream seems to get tired eventually, at least weary of the tedium, because *finally* he pauses, and Wilbur foolishly for just a moment wonders if he's given up.

They're well into this round of violence, Tommy a mess of wounds, a knife through either palm and gouges made down his arms, but Dream pauses, bloodied knife in hand.

"I'm gonna try something else. I'll give you *some* credit, Wilbur. You're definitely stronger than I thought you'd be," Dream goes to one of his chests and Wilbur feels fresh dread rising in his throat. Dream returns with a new bottle of poison.

"W-What're you..." Wilbur stops himself sharply. He knows it's no use.

"You'll *see*," Dream says teasingly. He begins to untie the gag from Tommy's mouth, slapping his cheek lightly. "You still with us, Tommy?"

Tommy isn't dead, but he's probably on his way to dying, from the hazy look in his eyes. Tommy spits out the cloth, mouth dry and uncomfortable after so many hours.

Dream continues to taunt him. "What was it you said earlier, Tommy? Talking about... about *beverages* or something stupid like that?"

Tommy leans away from Dream on instinct, but he also looks around him to Wilbur.

"H-Hey look..." Tommy says weakly. He raises his hands a few inches off the ground, knives and all. "Wil, look... I'm just like Jesus, Wil..."

Wilbur, uncontrollably, bursts out laughing. Once he starts, he can't seem to stop. A mad, hysterical cackle as he pulls against the chains and struggles to breathe, tears pooling fresh in his eyes, his ribs start to ache, and still he laughs, the sound sharp even in his own ears. Tommy surely would've followed if he had a shred of energy left, but he smiles crookedly, even as his brother has evidently snapped just a bit further.

"Fine, *fine*, Tommy, if this is how you wanna go?" Dream hisses viciously and stands, bottle still in hand. Dream manages to grab Wilbur by the hair even as he is *still* breathlessly laughing. He tilts Wilbur's head back and uncorks the bottle.

Wilbur has a modicum of sanity left to stop laughing and tightly close his mouth, staring at the bottle with wide eyes. Dream pinches his nose shut and waits, holding on tight even as Wilbur tries to yank himself free, but Dream holds tight enough to his nose the only way he would get free is by breaking it.

“W-Wil..?” Tommy’s feeble voice speaks up with a hint of panic. “Wil, are... wait, h-hold on...”

Wilbur can’t help it, he’d already made himself out of breath, now with lungs burning, eyes streaming, he opens his mouth, intending on taking one sharp gasp before closing it again, but Dream forces the bottle between his teeth, the only way Wilbur could close his mouth now is by chewing glass.

Which, considering, might be preferable.

“Wil!” Tommy screams hoarsely as his brother tries to cough up the poison, writhing even as his wrists bleed, trying to get away, but Dream doesn’t stop until the bottle is empty, taking it out and clamping Wilbur’s jaw shut, having to struggle to hold him with the way Wilbur is seizing, still desperately trying to spit it up through his gritted teeth, and soon the potion trailing down his cheeks from the corners of his lips is diluted with blood.

“Wil! Please! Please, wait! Please!” Tommy, all coherency abandoned, pleads hysterically, uselessly, as Wilbur continues to struggle.

Dream has gotten what he wanted, but he doesn’t even seem to realize it in his own mania, all of his effort on holding Wilbur still, on keeping his mouth shut even when he feels Wilbur’s jaw crack underneath his fingertips.

Finally, Wilbur stops moving.

The silence, the stillness that follows is eerie, broken only by Tommy’s weak, wheezing sobs. Dream steps back, wiping the mixture of blood, poison, and bile onto a rag.

“Should’ve spoken up sooner, Tommy,” Dream sounds not calm, nor frustrated, but something terribly closer to triumphant. He’s breathing almost as hard as Tommy is. “But you *broke*,” he says with fierce, giddy pride. “You broke first, Tommy! You fucking *broke*!” Dream pauses and only then does he realize he can no longer hear Tommy crying. He turns around to find the other member of his captive audience has also stopped moving.

“Oh.” Dream stands alone in the silence, exhaustion finally falling heavily on his shoulders, his victory fading rapidly without a loser to taunt. The silence extends long enough for Dream to feel gloomy again. “This isn’t *fun* anymore.”

Chapter End Notes

remember kids, fascists and bullies don’t care if they’re disliked, but they hate being laughed at!

Chapter 38

Chapter Notes

CW: manipulation, blood, vomiting, abuse, threats of violence, straight up lying, very mild eye trauma, very mild self harm, dehumanization, idk, smoking?

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Please don’t make me do that again,” Wilbur says it the moment Tommy stumbles into his Limbo, hearing him rather than seeing him as he remains sitting on the edge of the platform. “I can’t. I can’t just... just *sit* there when I could’ve... I could’ve gotten him to stop! I could’ve made him stop!”

“Yeah.” Tommy sits beside him. “I don’t wanna do it anymore either. I couldn’t even... I couldn’t let him— I’m sorry. *You* held out, and I didn’t. I know you agreed to it, but I couldn’t.”

“You didn’t?” Wilbur gives him a curious look.

“Yeah? Did you not hear?”

“Was a bit preoccupied, I suppose.”

“Right, fair enough.” Tommy lets out a shaky sigh. “Not like it mattered.”

“Yeah,” Wilbur sighs heavily. “We... we should keep trying to kill him, whenever we can, but when we *can’t*...”

“Play along. That’s... I dunno. We just can’t get too lost in it, y’know? We can’t get so used to trying to avoid pain that we miss an opportunity,” Tommy nods. “And! And we can’t give up immediately. It’ll make him suspicious if both our attitudes switch around. I mean, at least me especially, he expects less strength from you, no offense, but we play along until we get a proper chance. I mean a *proper* one. Both of us there, able to move, and... and ideally with a weapon, if it’s gonna be worth the risk, ‘cause I dunno if we’ll be able to repeat this, at least not for a long fucking while.”

“How the hell do you think Dream is gonna give us weapons?”

“Because he did once. When he wanted me to hurt Punz.”

“Punz is gone.”

“I know.” Tommy looks grim. “Look, until we get to the right situation, we might have to hurt each other.”

“Oh.”

“Eventually, we *have* to get him, Wil. We have to.”

“Bird chipping away at a mountain...” Wilbur mutters.

“What?”

“Nothing. Just, this stupid... riddle or phrase or something. A bird pecking away at a diamond mountain. And once the bird has destroyed the mountain, the first second in eternity will have passed,” Wilbur scoffs. “It doesn’t matter.”

“Does the bird do it?”

“What?”

“Destroy the mountain. In the riddle, the story or whatever, does it destroy it?”

“I dunno,” Wilbur shrugs. “That’s not... that’s not how it’s worded, it’s a... a hypothetical. Arguably a measurement.”

“That’s a dumb story.”

“It’s not a story.”

“Well it’s dumb anyway.”

Wilbur laughs. “Guess it is.”

“Right, so,” Tommy nods. “We... we play along until we have a chance. A *good* chance.” Tommy refuses to think about the fact that that line of logic was what kept him obedient the first time around.

“*Wake up.*”

This time, Tommy is brought back first. When he first processes where he is, he’s confused. Tommy is lying on a bed. He feels a chain around his waist. He opens his eyes slowly. As he’d first guessed, and then hadn’t fully believed, he’s back in his cell. His *first* cell at this base, the one with light and access to drinking water and a bed.

“What the fuck..?” Tommy mutters hoarsely. He sits up. He can stand too. The chain around his waist is long enough he can walk the room, and this way he cannot remove it with a broken wrist. It also feels a bit like a toddler leash, which Tommy finds rather undignifying.

“Welcome back,” Dream says.

Tommy stands up sharply, turning to face him. Dream leans against the doorway. He’s still in that new mask. Tommy thinks it looks flimsier than his old one.

“Calm down, I’m not here to *poison* you,” Dream says mockingly. Tommy doesn’t reply. “Look,” Dream sighs. “Clearly, you and Wilbur have snapped, and my methods *aren’t* working. So, I’m trying again.”

“Yeah? What now, I starve to death again?” Tommy scowls, glancing around the room as if a makeshift weapon will appear.

“No,” Dream laughs. “No, if you want food, I’ll bring you food, Tommy.”

“If I do what?”

“Nothing,” Dream shrugs. “If you’re hungry, I guess?”

Tommy feels like there are alarm bells ringing in the back of his head. “What the fuck are you playing at?” He snaps.

“Nothing, *nothing*,” Dream laughs again. “I’ll prove it to you.” Dream leaves, the cell door open behind him.

Tommy goes as far as the chain will let him, but he can’t reach the corridor. He can’t get close enough that he could wait around the corner to jump Dream either. Tommy steps back sharply when Dream returns, Dream stopping in the entryway, waiting for him to get away. Then he enters. Not within reach of the chain. Dream kneels down and slides a wooden tray across the floor. On it, there is bread, a baked potato, and some dried fish, as well as a small tin cup.

Tommy cannot imagine how many days, how many deaths ago, he ate something. He also hasn’t drunk anything either. He grabs the cup, thinking of poison.

“There’s nothing in here,” Tommy finds something to be defensive about.

“You still have your sink for water. Sorry I didn’t bring you like, sparkling apple juice or something,” Dream huffs.

Tommy stares at him, measuring up the little cup in his hands. He couldn’t kill a man with this. It’s too sturdy to rip apart into a shank and would probably dent long before Dream’s skull broke. He hurls it at Dream’s face as hard as he can.

“*Ow! Fuck!*” Dream stumbles back, mask cracked down the middle as Tommy’s aim had been perfect. Dream grimaces, pinching his nose. “What the *fuck*, Tommy?!”

“Could you hand me my cup? I seem to have dropped it.” Tommy says dryly. Then he moves fast. He *really* wants some water, but it will be far easier for Dream to take a tray from him than a sink, so he grabs the strips of dried fish and stuffs it in his mouth alongside a bite of the potato.

“You’re gonna make yourself puke, you idiot,” Dream snaps, still rubbing his sore nose. Tommy glances up from the tray and gets some satisfaction from Dream’s face having a large red welt right in the middle of it. He keeps eating, even if he knows Dream is probably

right. “I’m not gonna take it from you! God, just be a normal fucking person for five minutes?!”

Tommy says words. Maybe. Through the potatoes and the bread it doesn’t sound like much.

“What?!”

Tommy swallows an almost painful amount of food. “Askin’ me to be normal, that’s rich coming from you!” Only now does he allow himself to be separated from the tray long enough to chug water from the sink. *Water*, fuck, he’s forgotten how *good* water is. He’s already cold, so the icy water pouring down his face isn’t ideal, but he can’t stop himself, drinking until he feels like he’s going to be sick.

Dream paces from foot to foot like he has half a mind to go over there to hit Tommy and half a mind to storm out, but he does neither. With an irritable frown, he sits in the entryway, arms folded across his chest. “I’m not gonna take it from you! But if you puke, I’m not getting you more until tomorrow!”

Tommy snorts, wiping his face on his bloody sleeve. “You’re gonna feed me two days in a row? In what fucking world?” He scoffs. He does slow down, though, slumping back against the wall, grabbing and holding onto the tray tightly, but he stops eating, already regretting his previous enthusiasm.

Silence. Dream remains pouting in the doorway, not even bothering to look at him.

Tommy’s head still echoes with warning, a running track of *wrong wrong wrong wrong wrong* that he doesn’t intend to ignore, but if they’re playing along now, he might as well ask.

“Where’s Wilbur?”

“Still dead,” Dream says. “Not gonna stay that way, but I wanted to get you situated first. You don’t get to see him, though. You’ll have to earn that.”

Tommy huffs, watching Dream warily. “And how do I do that?”

“By *listening*. And by not fucking throwing things at my head,” Dream snaps, but he still makes no move to hit Tommy for what he’d done. “Basically, you decide how I treat Wilbur. If you behave, he’s looked after. And the other way too. If you want to stay here, to stay... comfortable, you better hope Wilbur learns to play nice.”

“Go choke on a fuckin’ worm,” Tommy scoffs.

Dream sighs, clearly bottling irritation, but persisting as if Tommy hadn’t spoken. “You could also make me more revive books. So you don’t get out of practice.”

Tommy scowls. “What, I write fifty in the next hour and you don’t break my fingers?”

“No. You write any in the next few hours, and maybe you’ll get some more food.”

Tommy stares at him doubtfully. “You’re gonna feed me twice? In the *same day*?”

“Yeah. And after I get your brother set up, I’ll bring you some not gross clothes,” Dream gets to his feet, watching Tommy for a reaction.

Tommy watches his every move, wired like a spring in response.

“I’ll be back in a bit,” Dream says shortly. He goes to leave, and then pauses. He kicks the tin cup back over to him before shutting the cell door behind him.

Tommy looks in baffled worry at the tin cup.

“Oh, this makes *no* fuckin’ sense...”

Tommy paces, waiting and listening for Wilbur, tugging at the chain around his waist, but even emaciated as he is, there’s not a bone he can break to get it off. He feels sick, regretting scarfing down the food, especially without appreciating it properly. He still has some of the bread and the fish. Tommy still jumps when the door opens again.

“It’s just me,” Dream laughs. “Wilbur is settled. I couldn’t have you two being neighbors again, like I said, you two talking is a *reward* you’ll have to earn, but he’s... comfortable. For now. You have my word.”

“Like that’s worth fuck all,” Tommy snarls.

Dream ignores the jab. “Here.” He stands just at the edge of the reach of the chain and offers a bundle of clothes. Tommy doesn’t move. “Go on. Look, I can put them on the ground, but I don’t think you want them to get all wet.”

Tommy calculates. There is no benefit to him denying himself this, and there is no obvious gain for Dream if he accepts. He walks closer, half expecting Dream to instead jump at him and start beating him senseless for the tin cup, but he just waits, arms outstretched, until Tommy takes the clothes and quickly backs away like a skittish cat.

“That should make you feel less gross, huh?” Dream says goodnaturedly. The prick hasn’t replaced his mask yet. The prick is *smiling*. “Did you work on a revive book at all?”

“No,” Tommy says defiantly, daring Dream to retaliate.

“Fine, like, there’s no *deadline*,” Dream raises his hands, as if passive. “Just, when you get bored.” He shrugs. Silence, Tommy staring daggers at him. “I’ll let you get cleaned up, but I’ll stop by some time later.”

“Why?” Tommy asks sharply.

“I dunno,” Dream says mildly. “To check in.”

Tommy has no angry retort to make, he just stares at Dream like he’s grown a second head. Dream does as he said he would. He simply leaves. Tommy stares at the sealed cell door, waiting for something bad to happen. Nothing does. Tommy sets aside the clothes. He would *love* to get the blood off of him, but right now he needs to think.

Okay. Okay, this could work, Wil. If we all the sudden started playing along, he'd get suspicious, but if he's changing his strat, then, well. Us acting better would make sense, right?

He wishes he could actually talk to his brother.

Maybe I could earn that. And then on visiting day or whatever the fuck, we grab him.

Tommy nods to no one, having come to a conclusion, and goes to the sink. He begins to peel his tattered shirt away, dried blood sticking and pulling painfully, but he's accustomed to that. He throws the ruined shirt aside, nose crinkled in disgust, and turns on the sink. His stomach has settled enough he can take a few more gulps of water before he gets to work scrubbing away the blood. The water is only ever cold, and he's shivery soon after, but slowly but surely he gets a bit cleaner. He pauses once more, staring down at his skin. There are new scars. Trails marking not just the cuts, but where the poison had dripped down. He quickly scrubs his hands and is unsurprised to see two messy circles in the center of his palms, scars extending up between his fingers as the blood and poison had dripped there as well.

Dream made Wilbur drink that stuff. Fucking hell, and now he's playing all nice...

Tommy puts on the clean clothes, trying not to feel too appreciative of the socks, and sits on top of the bed. The clean clothes are nice. They're not slightly damp, so he feels a shred warmer, and if he keeps his feet tucked up on the bed, maybe his socks will dry. He rocks back and forth slightly, wracking his brains for some other way for them to kill Dream.

Wish there was some way I could've smuggled away some of the poison. Like in the movies and shit. But Dream never eats or drinks around us, and if I could hold him down and force it down his throat, I might as well kill him some other way.

Maybe me and Wil should just try to kill ourselves as much as possible. That way Dream can't have us, kind of.

He could be hurting Wil.

There's every chance he is. He said he was gonna put him somewhere okay, but why the fuck would you believe him?

Tommy stares at the door for a time, waiting for it to open. He's so fucking tired. He's had food and water for the first time in days and now his body yearns for sleep, especially as he's in an actual bed instead of wooden slats or the icy stone floor; there's even a blanket. Still, he can't help but resist. He knows vigilance will not protect him, but he still wishes Wilbur were there to keep watch. Tommy stands slowly, glancing at the door often, and pulls the blanket off, wrapping it around his shoulders. It's not quite warm, but it certainly fends off some of the chill; he's so thin now, and sleeps curled up so tightly, the small blanket is enough to cover him. He'd forgotten how much cold air hurts, so numb to the constant ache in his bones, and the relief of being shielded from it. He's also drier than he has been in a long time. The hunger pangs have been replaced by the dull ache of his over eating, his mouth is no longer sand paper, and he is covered in dry cloth. Maybe some of the tension

leaves him, maybe he allows himself this small mercy, this shred of peace, or not peace, but rather the *luxury* of being dry and fed. Tommy curls in a ball on top of his bed, the chain around his waist settling uncomfortably against the thin mattress, but nonetheless, he sleeps better than he has in a long time.

~

Wilbur is awoken from Limbo several hours after Tommy, and probably a matter of minutes in the living world. His experience of resurrection is not the same as his brother's. It is, like his last death, also far more violent. Wilbur returns to life under the blue light of a sea lantern, laid out on wooden slats in the cell he and Tommy had occupied before, but the scenery is not his priority. First is the terrible *burning* still sharp in his throat. He rolls over quickly and vomits old blood and vestiges of poison into the water. The resurrection forces it from his body, like it's wringing out his organs like a sponge, and all he can do is gag and allow vibrant, bloody bile to drip from his lips. His body convulses, like a repetition of his desperate resistance to his death, and Wilbur has never had a more unpleasant time puking. He thinks it should be over by now, but somehow the revival finds a few more dredges of poisonous bile to eject from his throat, stinging the back of his nose, leaving him clammy and weak. His gasping for breath leads to a tightening around his torso, letting him fuzzily notice the only change in common with Tommy, a chain is now around his waist and bolted to the wall instead of to another wrist. Once Wilbur is doing more breathing than gagging, Dream speaks.

"Welcome back," Dream stands on the other side of the room. He's not wearing a mask anymore. "Rough awakening, huh?"

Wilbur sits up sharply, finally cognizant enough to look for Tommy. "Where is he?" Wilbur is barely audible. He winces, a hand going to his throat, which is still raw and painful, the resurrection ensuring the poison was removed, but not much else.

"Sorry, what was that?" Dream laughs, half under his breath, coming down the steps closer, but of course not in reach. "Couldn't quite hear you."

Wilbur glares at him. "Where... is Tommy?" Wilbur rasps, struggling to speak louder, even though Dream can well enough guess what he's asking.

"He's fine. Alive, currently unharmed. For now."

"Do you expect me to—" Wilbur cuts himself off with a wince. "T-To believe you?"

Dream shrugs. "You don't *have* to, I guess. Not like it matters." Dream nods to the other wooden platform, unoccupied. On it, there is a bowl of dried fish, a baked potato, some bread, and two glass bottles of water. There is also a blanket folded neatly beside it. Ominous. "I left you some food."

"...Why?"

"Because. I got Tommy food, so it's only fair you get some too. But it's not always gonna be like this, to be clear. Your... conditions, you depend on each other. Isn't that *cute*? You

can't see each other yet, you both have to earn that, but I'm still letting you two be codependent," Dream laughs. "Basically, if you behave, Tommy is looked after, if Tommy behaves, you're looked after. Simple."

Wilbur tries to find the shortest sentence to express his sentiment. "W-We can't trust you."

"Again, it doesn't *matter*," Dream insists, eerily delighted. "Because what matters is Tommy is going to see the consequences of your actions, and you're going to see the consequences of his actions. Think of it like another experiment."

Wilbur ignores Dream and goes over to the food, taking it and receding back to the other platform, the one furthest from Dream. He scans a piece of bread methodically.

"I'm not gonna *poison* you," Dream scoffs. "Well, not *again*."

Wilbur gives him a suspicious glance, setting aside the bread and grabbing one of the bottles of water. He pauses for a moment to smell the bottle, but all he can smell is saltwater from the rest of the cell. He downs it, it stings his raw throat, dulling the burn and replacing it with the faint, vile taste of sickness. He almost chokes, forcing himself to pause and take a breath, eyes closed for a moment as for the first time in days he has water.

"Alright, I'm gonna go bring some clean clothes to Tommy. I'm working on finding something you can wear, but most of the stuff I have I stole *because* it would fit Tommy. I dunno. Maybe I'll go through Punz's stuff. He's too short, though. I'll figure it out," Dream shrugs, turning back toward the steps out of the cell. "Talk to you later, Wilbur."

Wilbur finds words come more easily now that he has had something to drink. "What happened to your new mask?"

Dream pauses, turning back to face Wilbur with an sharp, unsettling smile. "I'm trying a more... sympathetic version of things. You've seen my face, and... Tommy has a reminder of the smile already, so, I thought I might as well not wear it," he shrugs again, still smiling. "Don't worry about it. Later, Wilbur." He leaves, and Wilbur is left feeling like he's missing something. Dream hasn't done any harm. He knows that cannot last, whatever pretenses he may put up. Of course, Dream doing damage is irrelevant. Wilbur still has the plan in mind. They play it safe until opportunity strikes. Wilbur nibbles on the bread, it is seemingly untainted, and by then he can't hold back, trying to pace himself considering the starvation, but Wilbur is so fucking sick of having a hollow stomach. If this is what playing it safe is, maybe he doesn't mind it so much. The question remains what they'll be playing it safe through.

~

Of all of Dream's strategies to try and bend him to his will, this is certainly one of the more unnerving. Dream returns, what Tommy *thinks* must be the following day, and he brings Tommy food. *Again*. Without anything expected in return.

"What now, you fatten us up and eat us?" Tommy scowls.

“Funny, Tommy. I don’t think two meals in two days are going to do that much,” Dream teases him, putting down the tray on the floor just within reach of Tommy. He still hasn’t replaced his mask, but there is an eerie smile nonetheless.

“Then why bother?” Tommy doesn’t move from his spot on top of his bed, pressed back against the wall, not cowering, but rather resisting the urge to lunge at Dream should he come in reach. However much hatred roils inside of him, he cannot let his emotions get the better of him. There’s a plan in place. He just has to focus on that.

“You’re still so stupid sometimes, huh?” Dream’s playing nice isn’t a miracle, he still talks to him with his usual dickishness. “I *told* you. I tried amping up the consequences, that clearly didn’t work, so now I’m doing the *mature* thing. We’re stepping back and trying some neutrality, maybe if you act right, some positive reinforcement. I mean, there can still be negative consequences, to be clear, but I think part of the issue was you connecting your actions *to* the consequences. I got a little... reckless with punishing you guys. No wonder you got confused.”

“*Confused?* Not fuckin’ confused... I *know* what you’re fucking like...” Tommy mutters irritably. It’s like Dream is reading from a dog training manual.

Dream dares to take one step closer, leaning forward. Tommy sits up straighter, but he doesn’t let himself give in to the impulse to try to throttle the man. “If that’s true, why don’t you *play the game?* You know it works out better for you that way.”

“What *game?*” Tommy says, despite knowing exactly what Dream is referring to.

Dream, sensing some change as Tommy hadn’t lunged at him the moment he stepped within reach, takes another step closer. “I don’t think I need to explain that to you.” Dream pauses, glancing at the chest currently holding untouched and empty quills and books. “Aren’t you getting bored in here?”

“No more than usual,” Tommy mutters.

“Do you want something to do?”

“I’m not writing your fucking books,” Tommy snarls before spitting at Dream’s feet, finally having enough water to do so. Even if he’s not trying to kill Dream, he’s not planning on playing nice any time soon.

Dream sighs. “You don’t *have* to write books. I could think of something else for you to do. I mean, if you want you and your brother to be together, somewhere...a bit more pleasant than the last place, you should help me put it together.”

“I’m not helping you do fuck all.”

“Don’t you want to see your brother again?” Dream feigns concern. “It’s not that hard. I’m going to be lenient. If you behave, not even doing anything to hurt yourself or Wilbur, just... playing along, just a *little*, that’s all it takes for you to see Wilbur.”

“And I’m expected to believe you?”

“It doesn’t *matter* if you believe me. It’s like I told Wilbur, *I* am going to enact the truth, whether you believe I will or not,” Dream says with something oddly sanctimonious in his tone. Dream is *still* smiling.

“The fuck are you looking at?” Tommy’s hands are tightly balled into fists. He doesn’t like that Dream hasn’t even *slapped* him for talking back, for spitting at him.

“Nothing. You just... you let me come over to you,” Dream shrugs.

Tommy has been hyper aware of how close Dream has gotten, always measuring the distance between Dream’s fists and his face, but he doesn’t like the way Dream has pointed it out. Dream is close enough to hit him, and he *hasn’t*, but he is. And Tommy hasn’t tried to hit him either. *Wrong*.

“So?” Tommy doesn’t like the way his voice breaks off, feeble and nervous. He presses himself back against the stonebrick, it hurting his bony shoulderblades as he does so.

“Don’t worry about it, it’s not a bad thing,” Dream laughs. “Just, proud of us. Of *you*. We’re already making progress.”

Proud of us. Of you.

Tommy has limits. Dream isn’t wearing a mask; spitting in his face is much easier with a bigger target. Tommy knows he hits his target, even more so when he feels sharp, stinging pain across his cheek as he’s thrown back against the wall, the slap harsh enough his jaw aches. Tommy laughs weakly, smug and almost relieved.

“D-Dream... Dream, come on, thought you were... thought you were trying to be nice,” Tommy sits up, waiting for another blow.

“You’re such a fucking brat!” Dream snaps, hand raised. Tommy shuts his eyes, but he doesn’t actually flinch, he’s almost calm as he waits. The blow never comes. Tommy opens them again, wary. Dream steps back, hand lowering. “I... I didn’t mean to do that,” Dream says stiffly. Tommy actually believes him, that Dream had hit him out of impulse or habit, but that doesn’t mean it makes any more sense for him to try and take it back. “I’m trying to be *lenient*. You... you make that really hard.”

Tommy is baffled. The *last* time he had spit in Dream’s face, Dream had tried to make Wilbur hit him and then he’d buried him alive. This is quite the tonal shift.

Dream sighs, stepping back, wiping his face irritably. “You... you like doing stuff with your hands, don’t you?”

“You fucking what?” Tommy sputters incredulously.

“You... you like *making* stuff. Don’t you? I’d give you some whittling tools, but there’s no way in hell I’m giving you a blade. Maybe I... I could bring you some clay. Something like that, if you don’t want to help me renovate just yet.”

“*Clay?*” Tommy mouths the word silently, like he can’t understand it.

“See, Tommy, Wilbur is behaving better than you are, so you get rewarded. And I want you to think about how Wilbur is going to be treated, after *you* acted like this,” Dream says icily.

“How the fuck do you expect me to believe you if you won’t let me see him?” Tommy snaps.

“I already told you it doesn’t matter if you believe me, it doesn’t change how I’m treating him!” Dream snaps back.

Silence, the two of them glaring at each other, and Tommy is unsettled to find the way the two of them have interacted on this occasion, Dream’s reactions, it makes them almost feel like equals. He doesn’t know if that’s the message Dream was actually intending to get across.

“I’ll be back later. I’ll find something for you to do,” Dream finally breaks their locked gaze. “We’re going to fix this together, Tommy. Just you wait.”

Dream leaves him.

Tommy is used to waiting things out, but he also knows Dream is patient when he needs to be. He continues to check on Tommy daily. He brings him a ball of clay, which Tommy had tried to throw at his head, Dream feeds him daily, and he makes the same offer over and over for Tommy to come out and help him renovate the base.

Tommy is just playing the game, he’s just doing as he and Wilbur had agreed to when he plays along, when he finds himself fiddling with the clay, when he eventually, reluctantly, asks Dream what *kind* of renovations on the base.

“Nothing too exciting. I just wanted to expand the farm, maybe make some more outdoorsy space for you boys, since, well, I *really* can’t let you out of the base any time soon, considering your track record,” Dream says lightly.

“You’re... you’re offering to let me farm stuff?” Tommy tries to sound suspicious rather than hopeful, but he knows he sounds like both.

“Yeah! I mean, what kind of damage can you do with a stone hoe?” Dream laughs.

Tommy still is puzzled, cogs turning slowly. A redundant question comes to mind, but that’s about it. “...Why?”

“I’m being *nice*, Tommy,” Dream says smugly. “And eventually, we’re going to be friends again! Promise.”

“And when do I see Wilbur again?”

Dream is still smiling. “When I think you’ve earned it.”

Tommy nods. Once he and Wilbur are in the same room again, then they might actually have a shot at killing Dream. If this is where playing along leads, it’s not so bad. Tommy could do

this.

“Fine. I’ll help you with your stupid fucking renovation project.” Tommy still won’t be pleasant about it.

“Great! Give me your hands.” Dream rummages through his inventory, returning with cuffs. “Behind your back, if you don’t mind, since you seem to have a nasty habit of trying to strangle me.”

Tommy scowls. He doesn’t move. “Why the fuck would I go along with this if you’re gonna chain me up?”

“I can’t trust you, Tommy. Isn’t that obvious?” Dream laughs. “Once we get to the farm, I’ll put that other chain on the wall, so you can work freely.”

Tommy is wildly aware that protesting at this point is useless, but it’s hard to give in. It’s hard not because he actually struggles with the act, with accepting his defeat, rather the opposite. *Allowing* Dream to do what he wants with him, to go along with things blindly, it’s too familiar, too *easy*.

Nonetheless, Tommy does as Dream said, but he at least is sure to complain about it the whole time.

“Do you have any fucking idea how ridiculous it is that we keep on trying to strangle you with chains, and you go ‘oh, I know! I’ll fix that by using *more chains*.’ Ay? Stupid as shit.”

Dream doesn’t reply. He doesn’t snap back, or tell him to shut up, he just rolls his eyes, more amused than anything, and begins to guide Tommy down the hall, now that he’s ensured the boy can’t strangle him. Tommy only drags his feet once they actually get to the farm, and he sees a grave, open and waiting.

“Hold on, hold on a fucking second!” Tommy struggles viciously. “No! No, I— You can’t, I haven’t—” Tommy’s first impulse is to say *I haven’t done anything wrong*, but that’s not exactly true. Rather, he doesn’t believe he’s done anything deserving of being buried alive, but that would imply that there *are* some things deserving of that, that *last* time he had somehow deserved that fate.

“Calm down, Tommy,” Dream scoffs, shoving him forward. “It’s just... leftover. I don’t plan on burying you again, okay?”

Tommy’s racing heart settles slightly, he still glances warily between the grave and Dream, but Dream merely takes the length of chain from his waist and ties it around the fence of the now empty chicken pen. Then, he unchains Tommy’s wrists.

“Here,” he offers Tommy a diamond pickaxe.

“What do you want me to do?” Tommy asks, hopefully with some scorn, but he also knows part of it is a terribly genuine urge to ask for direction.

“Make the place bigger. Don’t make it more than two blocks high, though, unless you’re planning on putting a pond in there,” Dream says lightly.

“You’re... you’re giving me a pickaxe,” Tommy says slowly, even as he accepts it.

“Yeah. Well done, Tommy. That *is* a pickaxe,” he says sarcastically.

“Couldn’t I just...” Tommy looks down at the chain around his waist. “*Break* it?”

“I mean, you *can*. You can try running at me with a pickaxe, but I’ll be watching you, and I have my crossbow at the ready, so more likely, I’ll just shoot you before you can get to me,” Dream shrugs. “And I *had* to give you a strong pickaxe considering you’re going to be fighting off mining fatigue a few blocks in.”

“You want me to dig *through* mining fatigue?” Tommy asks, baffled.

Dream raises an eyebrow at him. “Do you have anything better to do?”

“Do *you* have any milk?” Tommy asks.

“Nope. I used it all on getting rid of the poison from your wounds, not that you were very grateful for that.” Dream backs away from the length of chain, going to the opposite wall, getting out his own Netherite pickaxe. “Now, go. Do it. I’ll even help you.”

Tommy stares at Dream for a few moments, calculating. He won’t be able to break the chain without alerting Dream, and he certainly won’t be able to cross the room in time to bash it into Dream’s neck before the man can shoot him. So instead, he turns to the stone wall beside him and begins to dig.

Tommy didn’t need mining fatigue to begin with. He’s grown so thin and weak, it’s hard to do any of this as is, but he also refuses to admit weakness. Even as it hurts, it’s still a relief. He loathes the thought that Dream is right. He needs to be *doing* something, and having been deprived of that so long, it makes any task feel like a worthy goal. Tommy has become *beyond* slow. He struggles to break a single block, often forced to stop and give up before it actually breaks, just to lean against the wall and struggle to breathe, arms trembling from raising the pickaxe. These pauses mean breaking a single block takes several attempts. Tommy also has a feeling his breathing shouldn’t sound like this from swinging a pickaxe a few times. Tommy starts to stumble before each swing, standing is starting to become a challenge. His legs are as shaky as his arms now.

“Take a break, Tommy. There’s no way you should be able to keep moving that long,” Dream interrupts him some time later, and Tommy, despite his trembling limbs and headache, almost doesn’t want to stop.

“A... a break?” Tommy asks hoarsely, wiping his eyes as dust had accumulated from breaking apart the stone.

“Yeah, you know. Where you *stop* and rest for a bit?” Dream says dryly. “Here. And if you give me your pickaxe so I know you won’t break the chain, I’ll even go feed Wilbur, how’s

that sound?" Dream offers him a baked potato, some carrots, dried fish, and a bottle of water.

"Fine," Tommy mutters, tossing him the pickaxe and accepting the food gratefully, settling on the ground.

"You've already made more progress than I thought you would, honestly. Maybe we'll call it quits in a bit. Be right back," Dream leaves, allegedly to go feed Wilbur, and Tommy is too weary to ponder on the potential double meanings of *progress*. He's mined out a decent amount of the back wall, a task that in his former life would have taken minutes instead taking hours. He's also done what Dream has asked many times.

This was the plan, right? We play along, we wait, we strike, Tommy reminds himself as he eats with desperation, not from fear of Dream taking it from him, but that he'd finally moved enough to burn calories to a significant degree, so his hunger pangs feel more earned. *Water* is so good. Tommy always forgets the profound relief it so easily offers. He finishes the bottle quickly, and wants more. He scans the farm, wondering where Dream feeds the irrigation system from. He doesn't see a water pump of any sort anywhere, so instead he grabs a carrot. Part of him feels he'll break his teeth on one, and he remembers how sweet they had tasted the last time.

Carrots are so sweet, the crunch of them is almost startling, and Tommy has to pause, getting choked up for reasons he can't quite name. Reasons that maybe have to do with the list he made of things he would never see again before Dream took him away. He's eating *carrots* again. Dream hadn't tried to feed him mushroom soup *once*.

Tommy doesn't want to hate his existence all the time. Even if he is not actively trying to murder Dream right now, he wants to be able to sit back, to eat and feel peaceful, even for a moment. Dream isn't even in the room. This has nothing to do with his influence.

It has everything to do with him, and you know it, that nagging thought irritates him, but that doesn't make it any less true. He takes one more vicious bite of a carrot, almost vengefully, before wincing, a hand going to his jaw and the sharp pain there. It's been many days and resurrections since, but he'd forgotten he'd cracked a tooth trying to help Wilbur get free. That darkness, Wilbur's mouth so bloody and Tommy's fingertips rapidly going numb, it feels so far away.

Tommy jumps in spite of himself when Dream returns. Dream smiles.

"Wilbur has food now too. He's doing okay, all things considered. Haven't figured out how to get *him* some enrichment. First I thought a guitar, but, y'know," Dream wiggles his ten intact fingers as if to demonstrate. "Doesn't really work."

Tommy just stares at him. *Enrichment*. First of all, fucking patronizing. They're not *zoo animals*. Secondly, it is still a word with good intentions behind it, maybe not from the mouth of a snake, but something like it. Dream's motivations remain oddly close to a caretaking role. That can't be right.

"You look pretty tired, Tommy. Considering your current condition, spending over an hour mining is probably pushing it. Come on, I'll take you back to your room," Dream

approaches, and pauses. “Now, Tommy,” he says, as if talking to a small child. “Are you going to be good and let me unchain you and walk you back to your room? Nothing bad is going to happen. I promise. I’m just going to come over and unchain you from the wall.” Dream approaches. And Tommy lets him. “You’ve got your food still with you? So you can take it back to your room?”

He says *room* instead of *cell*. One more thing that Tommy knows to be wrong. Tommy nods and stands, holding onto his remaining carrots. Dream hasn’t bothered chaining his wrists back. Tommy is going along with it. Also wrong.

“Good!” Dream looks so self satisfied. “Come on, then,” he doesn’t tug on the chain, merely nods him forward. Tommy follows and feels awfully like a cow on a lead. *No, because he hasn’t had to tug you anywhere. You’re not a cow, you’re a dog. You follow him by choice, you listen when he tells you to sit and stay, and you watch him, and wait for him to feed you.*

Tommy got too comfortable, too at ease. That’s far more dangerous than anything conjured by taunting Dream. He knows he’s playing a role, he’s playing along for a *reason*, but it still scares him how easy it has become.

Therefore, when they pass by the empty grave Tommy knows could still be waiting for him, he gives Dream a little *push*.

The moment Dream tilts forward, gasping in surprise as he stumbles into the redug grave, Tommy feels that old manic bloodlust return. He steps up to the edge, heart beating faster, as he contemplates ways he could break him from up here. In the grave, Dream staggers back to his feet, cheeks flushed and fuming. He’s unsteady as he stands and Tommy desperately hopes the fall has injured him in some way.

“*Tommy*, what, was that your idea of a *joke*?” Dream reaches out one hand to grab the edge of the grave. “You’re stupider than I thought—” Tommy steps on his hand as hard as he can, feet bare so he can only dig his heel into Dream’s knuckles to do any damage. “*Tommy!*” Dream yanks his hand back. “You really wanna try that again?” Dream scoffs, digging his hand into the dirt, pulling himself up that way instead of risking Tommy’s wrath.

Tommy looks around desperately for a weapon, a shovel, anything, and makes a peculiar, almost growling noise of elation in his delight at finding the iron pipe Dream had used for him to breathe in the grave. It won’t do much against netherite, but he would imagine it’s much harder to crawl out of a hole while someone clarts you over the head. Tommy feels that familiar, deranged giddiness rising when the moment he sees Dream begin to pull himself up, he does his best to jab him in the eye with the pipe. Dream jerks back, hitting it away from his face.

“What the fuck—“

“Having some *trouble* there, Dream?! Imagine doing that through four fucking feet of dirt!” Tommy jeers. Dream begins to climb up again and Tommy swings the pipe at his head, it glances off of his helmet without leaving a scratch and leaves Tommy's hands dotted with pinpricks of blood, but it sends Dream stumbling back and definitely pisses him off.

“*Tommy!*” Dream still has the audacity to try to sound like a rational adult. “Think about what you’re doing right now.”

“I am, *obviously!* Otherwise I would’ve missed!” Tommy cackles. Tommy raises the pipe for another swing, just as Dream lunges forward and—Tommy realizes far too late—grabs onto the length of chain still hanging from around his waist. “Wait, *waitwaitwait*—” Tommy stammers frantically, cut off with a yelp when the chain knocks his feet out from under him. He hits the ground hard, but has no time to catch his breath, as he feels Dream starting to drag him toward the grave. “*Stop!*” Tommy pleads impulsively, trying to kick Dream back, but it’s too easy for Dream now, tugging him down by the chain until he too tumbles into the grave. Tommy clings to a way out, the pipe across the grave, a bar he clings to to keep him off the ground. Dream, one hand still on the chain, uses the other to pry Tommy’s fingers off one by one, until finally, with a yelp Tommy hits the ground. It’s a narrow, suffocating space and Dream towers over him within it, Tommy backs himself into a corner, clawing at the earth around him. “Stay away!” Tommy cries out. Now weaponless, he tries to swing his feeble fists at Dream’s face, but he catches them effortlessly, his foot dragging the chain further down the grave so Tommy is pulled away from the wall and cannot try to cower in a corner. Dream doesn’t drag him out of the grave, not yet, first he digs his knee into Tommy’s bony chest so he loses what little air he’s managed in his gasping panic and holds down Tommy’s wrists easily with one hand.

“Let go!” Tommy gasps, struggling furiously.

“No. Not until you listen, Tommy,” Dream continues, absolutely, horrifically calm. “I’ve *chosen* to be nice. But this isn’t my only option. And I know you think you can *endure* whatever pain I put you through, and maybe that’s true, but this was never about *pain*, Tommy. It’s about *control*,” Dream looks down at him, from those stupid, human eyes, and there’s this awful pity there, Tommy nothing more than a diseased rat eating itself alive. Dream tuts him, “I’ve told you before, everything you are belongs to me, right? And I could remind you of that *instead* of being nice.” The pity fades into something far more enthused, a smile returning, not the strange, hollow one of placating him, but something too genuine and eager. “I have ideas, Tommy! I *still*, have ideas,” Dream hisses, drops of rage slipping through the cracks, before the joy returns. Tommy doesn’t know if Dream knows how to have joy without rage. “I could deprive you of your senses, blindfold you, even cover your ears, deprive you of your ability to move, paralyzed or otherwise, just as I’ve deprived you of food, or of water. I could put you back in a coffin, not buried,” Dream glances at the dirt walls closing in around them, “no, but kept *safe*. Chained down so you can’t hurt yourself, just like how you can’t move. How’s that sound, Tommy?” Dream croons as if offering treatment to a sick child. He turns sarcastic, “right now you have to earn seeing Wilbur, *sure*. How unfair of me, right? But...” Dream’s hand brushes over Tommy’s eyes even as he struggles to free himself, covering them, holding them closed, pressing hard against Tommy’s face as he tries to pull away, even as his struggling risks turning a bruised rib into a cracked one against Dream’s knee digging into his chest. “Imagine if you had to earn *sight* back? Huh? If you can’t move, you can’t take out... I dunno, *earplugs* or whatever. Hell, if I make you inhale bleach long enough, you’ll lose your sense of smell too, huh? Taking away sight *and* hearing might be a bit drastic. I can’t tell you what to do that way, but I guess if you already can’t move locked in a little box, it won’t matter.

“Do you get it, Tommy? Do you? *I* dictate everything about you. Whether you can see, whether you can speak, whether you can *feel*. I actually wouldn’t mind playing around with paralysis a bit more, now that we know it can be healed. How’s that sound, huh? Do you *want* to be able to feel, Tommy?” Dream presses down harder against Tommy’s eyes, until his skull aches against the hard packed earth beneath him, until his eyes begin to hurt; a feeble whine escapes through gritted teeth. “Hm,” Dream seems amused, knowing *exactly* what he’s doing, he can surely feel Tommy’s eyelids fluttering in a panic underneath his hold. “Maybe you don’t want it bad enough, considering your recent behavior.”

“G-Get the fuck off of me! Let me go!” Tommy shouts in a panic. He knows Dream will not listen, but Dream is also horribly right. Tommy hates that he cannot see, that Dream can hold him there so easily, and he especially hates the *pressure* Dream is currently putting on his eyes, the edge of his palm, of his fingers, angled to dig into Tommy’s eye sockets. “Let go!” Tommy cries out, terrified that Dream will do some more permanent damage if he goes any further.

“Shh! I’m *talking*,” Dream switches his grip, instead his hand cupped over Tommy’s mouth. Tommy opens his eyes, his vision is a haze of grey static, it lasts too long, he stares around frantically, consumed by the same hazy gray dots which remain, flickering over nothing, he can see *nothing*, until slowly, the light of the glowstone filters through, and then shadow, before finally his vision fizzles back to life, even as it remains blurred by tears. “But you know what?” Dream says almost sweetly. “I’m *not* gonna do any of that. Not yet. I am going to show mercy, because I don’t *want* to have to do that to you, alright? Hey, even now! I’m *still* being nice to you. I haven’t hurt you, I’m just holding you here so you can’t hurt *me*, see? I ask very little of you, Tommy. Maybe you could *not* put all of your efforts into giving me a reason to punish you, huh? How about that?” He waits, as if expecting Tommy to reply when he’s holding onto his jaw so tightly it hurts. “I’m going to let go, Tommy. And you’re not going to scream at me, you’re going to hold *still*. And if you do that, I won’t hurt you. I’ll let you stand up, and we’ll move on like this never happened, okay? Nod for me when you’re ready.”

Tommy doesn’t want to. Maybe obeying is the best way forward, it’s the only way out of this grave, certainly, but he doesn’t want to feel like he’s proving Dream right, that everything he does is because of Dream, that he belongs to him in some way. Tommy shuts his eyes. They still ache. He nods. Dream lets go, and Tommy doesn’t move. He doesn’t struggle, instead he feels like he’s eating himself alive from the inside out, still nothing more than a diseased rat.

“Good job, Tommy!” Dream ruffles his hair; it sends dirt cascading over his face. “See? I knew you weren’t beyond rehabilitation.”

Tommy doesn’t move when Dream gets up and out of the grave. He doesn’t move until he feels Dream tug on the chain, ushering him forward. Tommy stands and numbly accepts Dream’s offered hand. The man pulls him out of the dirt, letting go of his hand, and instead holding onto his shoulder firmly. His other hand is coiled in the length of chain, shortening it, like the leash of a rowdy dog. Dream guides him back into his cell, as he’d said he would, and reconnects the chain to the wall. Tommy stands exactly where Dream had left him,

unmoving even as Dream pats him on the back in his passing, praising him for giving in when offered no other option.

Then Tommy is alone.

You should've noticed the fucking chain was still there, in his reach. You should've pulled it back or maybe used it, maybe wrapped it around his neck again.

Tommy already knows what he will see, but he still tugs his shirt up past the chain, staring wearily at the line of deep purple encircling his skinny body. He bruises so easily too, it is not just one line, but bruises dotting his whole torso from when the chain had moved. He lifts his shirt a little higher and gloomily assesses the freshest bruise, a large circle in the center of his chest from Dream pinning him down. He drops the shirt. Tommy wants to wash the dirt off of him, to wash the feeling of *Dream* pressing down on his fucking skull off of him, but he's so tired. He's *always* tired. He turns to the sink, scrubbing away dirt, thinking.

You're getting sloppy, Tommy. You can't just knock him over every time you start to scare yourself, that's not playing along. You need another way to remind yourself that this is bad, that Dream is bad, no matter how he tries to buy your trust again.

Tommy sits on the edge of his bed, staring down at his hands, now cleaned. He blinks a few times. He still feels like there's a thin veneer of static over his vision, just enough to taunt him. He balls his hands tightly into fists, until his nails dig in enough that sharp pain pierces his palms.

Pain. You get too relaxed, you don't hurt him yet, you hurt you. Just so you stay focused.

Tommy uncurls his fists, and stares at the crescent moons cut into his palms. He's going to try, but pain is so ordinary now, he isn't sure what good it will do.

~

Wilbur is bored out of his fucking skull. Solitaire has lost some of its appeal, especially without an actual deck of cards, and Dream's visits are sparse in his many hours under the dull light of the sea lantern. He knows even if he is being left alone, that doesn't mean Tommy is. Knowing Dream, he's probably occupied doing horrible things to him. And here Wilbur remains, chained to a wall, useless.

Wilbur sits up sharply when the door opens. Dream had brought him food a few hours ago, he's back too soon. Dream stands in the doorway, staring at him, calculating.

"What?" Wilbur snaps.

"Tommy was good today. He behaved, so," Dream tosses him something. A half empty box of cigarettes. He tosses something else. A box of matches.

"What the fuck is this supposed to be?" Wilbur picks them up delicately. It's not just *one* cigarette, it's multiple. It's Wilbur having the ability to light them for himself. It's

unnerving.

“Tommy acts right, *you* get rewarded. I thought I made that clear. And the other way around too. Maybe if you started acting better, Tommy could get something too. Not a cigarette, of course, they’re *terrible* for you, but something. I dunno. A cookie or something.”

“I’ve been behaving well as I can considering I’ve just been left here,” Wilbur snaps at him, taking out a cigarette.

“What about the *attitude*, Wilbur?” Dream says mockingly. “You’re disrespectful,” he tuts him.

“Do something worthy of my respect, then,” Wilbur scoffs, lighting the match with ease.

“I’ve been kind, Wilbur. Kinder than either of you deserve. And aren’t you morons *obsessed* with kindness?” Dream folds his arms across his chest, leaning against the wall. Wilbur is more irritated by this considering it seems Dream doesn’t plan on going anywhere.

“Yeah, I doubt that line works anymore,” Wilbur mutters with a cigarette between his teeth, lighting it before flicking the lit match in Dream’s direction. It fizzles out uselessly in the water a meter away from him.

“What *line*? The truth? Despite your disobedience, despite your many attempts to *attack* me, I’ve shown mercy lately. And you and your brother are thankless *brats*.”

“Meant more your bullshit about deserve,” Wilbur leans back, exhaling smoke, burying a cough as his lungs adjust to their old abuse.

“You don’t think you deserve this? You don’t think you deserve *whatever* I give you?”

“Why would we?” Wilbur says almost lazily.

“Because I *made you*,” Dream is emphatic, eyes gleaming. “You both think my godhood is... *dramatic*, but it’s nothing less than the truth, Wilbur. Your very existence, you owe to *me*.”

“Actually, most of the credit goes to one Philza Minecraft and, possibly, a Samsung smart refrigerator—“

“No! No, because *you* died, *you* fucked up and killed yourself, and if it weren’t for *me*, you’d still be that way,” Dream snaps, childish the moment his facade wanes.

Wilbur looks up at him through dull, shadowed eyes, unimpressed. “Didn’t ask to be.”

“You’d rather spend an *eternity* in Limbo?”

Wilbur shrugs. “At this point? Probably.”

“You can’t *bargain* with Limbo, you can’t *earn* anything. With me, at least you have the chance of living better, if you’d just *earn* it.”

“Well,” Wilbur laughs, once more coughing on smoke. “We *can* bargain with Limbo, remember? That’s how we kicked your green teletubby ass the first time.”

Dream is quiet for a moment, just staring at him, anger still evident behind his eyes. “You’ll learn to be grateful eventually, Wilbur. Already,” he nods to the lit cigarette, “you’re appreciating what my kindness can do for you.”

Wilbur smiles, an attempt at remaining stubborn even if maybe a grain of truth in Dream’s words itches in the back of his mind. “Whatever you say, man.”

“I’ll be back later with food. Try not to chain smoke yourself to death while I’m gone.”

“*Chain smoke?* You gave me like, ten, how the fuck would I—“

Dream shuts the cell door on his complaining. He takes a deep breath. The pair of them are just as frustrating as before, but he *knows* this strategy is working. The two of them, he’s mangled their intolerance for violence, but they’ve been utterly starved of simple comforts. It’s just like in the earliest days of exile. Tommy could remain spitfire and harsh throughout Dream taking his stuff and mocking him, what *really* finally made him break was offering him food after ensuring he couldn’t get any. He will break them down, slowly but surely.

Tommy is the one who has actually been easier to deal with between the two. Tommy isn’t easily cold and uncompromising like Wilbur, his defense is always anger, and that makes him vulnerable. Even then, he isn’t merely angry, rather, he’s *suspicious*; meaning some part of him *still* wants to put his faith in Dream, his suspicion a last resort resistance to the inevitable. His episodes of *mania*, however, are harder to deal with. Those seem to be incited by Dream’s anger, so Dream will instead be kind. And he will let that destroy him.

~

Tommy’s many bruises ache, his muscles as well are miserably sore from their overuse, enough that sleep does not come to him easily. He shifts uncomfortably, trying to make the chain settle in a way that doesn’t fucking *hurt*, but there are always bruises for it to press into, and if not, it will be sure to dig up some new ones.

Exhaustion is quite the effective sedative. He sleeps, poorly, restlessly, but nonetheless.

For a brief moment he doesn’t know what’s happening when he is dragged off of his bed. Exhaustion is no match for instinct.

Tommy snarls hoarsely, kicking desperately as Dream pins his wrists back and binds them with chains. Tommy tries to kick him, but he quickly loses his balance so it is only Dream keeping him off the ground by the chain around his waist. “What’re you— what the fuck—“ Tommy tries to pull his head away as Dream ties a strip of cloth around his head, for once not keeping him silent, but yet again blinding him. Tommy writhes furiously, trying to get the blindfold off, and winds up smacking his face into *something*, so a bloodied nose and sharp, stabbing pain joins his panic, but Dream just grabs him around the middle—a far more stressful experience blind—and throws him over his shoulder. “*Put me down!*” Tommy screams, still struggling viciously, his efforts to kick Dream are rewarded with bloodied feet

as he only hits armor. Dream carries him out into the hall, Tommy knows by the pressing darkness, and scraping his head against the low ceiling, and he continues to stammer abuse Dream's way, "*get the fuck away from me! Put me down you fucking freak*—"

Light returns, but Tommy *still* doesn't know where he is, the blood from his nose is being pushed back by gravity and he can taste it now, and he's all the more disoriented by Dream throwing him onto the ground. Tommy hits it hard enough the wind is knocked out of him, unable to scream, he can finally hear that Dream is *laughing*.

"W-What the fuck are you..?" Tommy says hoarsely, trying to figure out where Dream is standing from the noise. Tommy yelps, startled, when Dream grabs his wrists, unchaining him. Tommy frantically yanks the blindfold off, wiping the blood off his face. Tommy blinks in the light of the glowstone, staring around in dazed terror at the farm. They *just* went to the farm. Tommy's anger returns, he throws the blindfold at Dream, "what the fuck was all that about?!" Tommy screams at him raggedly, something almost childish in this anger, like this had all just been a mean prank.

Dream is grinning. "What, am I not allowed to have a little *fun*, Tommy? It's not like I *really* blinded you all that long."

Tommy doesn't trust it. He struggles to stand, backing away from Dream, turning and tugging on the chain experimentally, but it's locked firmly to the wall. He scans the farm, but there is nothing different here, no new instruments of torment, *nothing*.

"Here."

Tommy jumps, turning and staring at Dream's offered hand like it might bite him. It's full of white powder.

"You... you giving me cocaine?" Tommy says hoarsely.

Dream sighs, "no, Tommy. I really can't tell if you're trying to be funny or if you're just that stupid. It's *bonemeal*, obviously."

Tommy still just stares at it. "...Why?"

"I don't know, Tommy, why would you need bonemeal in a farm?" Dream says sarcastically. "Harvest stuff. Plant stuff. Whatever you've got to do so you'll calm down, alright?"

"You... you want me to farm," Tommy says, not really a question, but confused all the same.

"I want you to calm down, so, yeah. If this does that. It'll be, like, therapeutic or whatever." Dream offers the bonemeal more insistently.

Tommy's hand is still shaky from the adrenaline when he reaches out to accept. His other hand he balls tightly into a fist, until his nails sink in deep enough to hurt.

"Look! I even made a new planter box in the spot you dug out," Dream nods cheerfully to the back of the room. "Next time I'm on the surface, I'll bring beetroot seeds. That'll be exciting, right?"

Tommy frowns, staring at the bonemeal. "I... I attacked you. You had to chain me up to even get me here, I haven't... I haven't *been good*."

"Yeah," Dream shrugs. "*And?* I'm trying to fix that! See?"

Tommy is still struggling to compute. "But this is..." Tommy isn't sure what he's meant to say, *this is too kind? This doesn't hurt?* Dream clearly knows that. Tommy's palm stinging he finds irritatingly grounding. Pain has helped his mind settle for a long time now, he needs to be *alert*.

"I promised you *benevolence*. I can be a benevolent god, Tommy, however hard that must be for you to believe," Dream teases. "Here. For your nose," Dream offers him the blindfold back so he can press the cloth to his bleeding face. Tommy takes it. "I've got to go... set something up, but you have fun here, alright?"

Dream leaves him there, relatively unharmed, with half a stack of bonemeal, surrounded by plants. Tommy stands there, confused and dazed, for perhaps too long, holding the cloth until his nose stops bleeding, but then he kneels down beside the nearest planter and begins to dig up potatoes.

Tommy pauses only once, gripped by an at first implacable panic, but then he sees his shaking hands, he sees the dirt under his fingernails. He used to *love* dirt under his fingernails. Despite the shreds of grief that reawakens, it offers a different solace. Tommy curls his hands into fists once more, but his nails cannot truly wound, instead, it presses the dirt deeper, deep enough his heart races and the air feels thinner. Tommy thinks of being buried. *Perfect*. He grows complacent, he pushes the dirt deeper under his fingernails until he remembers the right kind of fear.

Satisfied, Tommy returns to his potatoes. He is content *now*, sure, but that has nothing to do with Dream, even if this peace comes from Dream's offering. Tommy cannot resist this easy, slow work that still feels worth something. Tommy doesn't see how far and how fast he is slipping. Tommy could survive endless pain, he doesn't know if he can survive relief.

Tommy doesn't understand this peace, but it persists anyway. He is taken back to his room, he rests, he grows bored, and Dream returns. Taking him to the farm is far less elaborate now that Tommy has stopped attacking him, no more blindfolding or chained wrists, just a firm hand on his shoulder, and the chain around his waist. The bruises only fade somewhat, as even if Dream isn't dragging him into a grave, the chain bruises anyway. Dream brings him food and praise, he instructs him and continues mining out the room to make it bigger. Dream allows him to make beetroot soup. Tommy asks if Dream will bring some to Wilbur, and Dream does, or he says he does, at least.

This cycle continues. Tommy has not forgotten his purpose here, but he doesn't know what he's meant to *do*. Kill Dream with a stone hoe while chained to a wall? He needs Wilbur's help, and Dream said he could earn seeing Wilbur again, and Tommy believes him. That trust slips through the cracks, Tommy not even noticing the slight faith he has in Dream, he saves his protests, his methodology of dirt underneath his fingernails to nearly incite a panic attack, for more blatant threats. When Tommy starts joking with Dream, when he feels giddy in response to his praise, that's when he knows he has to pull himself out of it. It's been ages

now, even weeks, and Dream has only hit him two or three times, and all of those times he had sort of apologized afterwards, something more like “*sorry, I know I said I wouldn’t do that, but you can’t act like that,*” apologizing for going back on his word, not for the violence itself, but still, Tommy is shocked by how sparse the violence as been. He still hasn’t let him see Wilbur. Tommy is getting impatient.

“Why can’t I, though?” Tommy stands, brushing dirt from his hands, watching Dream mining on the other side of the room, out of his reach.

“Because you haven’t *earned it* yet,” Dream snaps, irritated by a conversation they’ve already had.

“How do I earn it, then? I’ve *been* doing what you want. What else is it gonna fuckin’ take for me to see Wilbur?” Tommy clings to his harsh tongue, he has not grown meek and apologetic again, not really, and he can take some solace in that. But he still is pleading far too politely for *Dream* to dictate when he sees his brother again. He knows demanding wouldn’t make a difference, but he hates that he is in fact asking for Dream’s permission.

“Think about it, Tommy, Wilbur is the be-all-end-all reward. I’m not going to give that to you until you’ve been... fully reformed,” is how Dream chooses to describe it.

Tommy scowls. “Okay, how the fuck do I get *fully reformed*, then?”

“You’re *still* disrespectful, Tommy,” Dream sighs.

“Earn my fucking respect then,” Tommy snaps back impulsively.

Dream looks over at him, almost amused. “Your brother said the same thing to me, actually. Hm. I don’t spend as much time with him, so he has had less opportunities to earn the right to see you, so it falls back on *you*, Tommy. *You’re* the one failing him right now.”

What Tommy *should* say is “*no I’m fucking not! You’re the one who decides this. You’re the one keeping him from me.*” Instead he frowns, and says, “I’m trying. You *know* I am, but I’ve tried and nothing has *changed*, Dream. I’m... I’m getting sick of it.”

“Hm,” Dream seems to consider this, still breaking the stone in front of him. He stays quiet too long.

“*You* said you were going to be nice! You say you’re gonna be better as a... a *god* or whatever the fuck, but you still don’t treat me like a fucking person!” Tommy bursts out.

Dream stops swinging, turning to look at Tommy, expression still too neutral. Tommy takes a step back. Dream had rarely hit him thus far, usually in response to Tommy trying to hit *him* first and rarely in response to him being mouthy, but Tommy still expects it.

“I *do* treat you like a person, Tommy. It’s just that *people* aren’t the same as *gods*,” Dream explains it to him, patronizing like he’s a child. “But fine,” Dream shrugs, putting away his pickaxe. “You haven’t been fixed yet, not properly, but you *have* gotten better.”

“You’re... you’re gonna let me see him?” Tommy is startled and terribly hopeful.

“No, but I *will* reward you with something I think is probably almost as good,” Dream says.

“Don’t tell me it’s *Punz*,” Tommy says gloomily.

Dream laughs, “no, Punz is... he’s gone. Even I can’t find him now.”

Tommy ignores how unsettling that is, and goes with his next guess, suspicious and wary.

“Did you... did you take Ghostbur, Dream?”

“*Take* him?” Dream mulls this over. “Not really. I mean, I *did* handle him, though.”

Silence presses heavy for a long second, as a type of fear Tommy hasn’t felt in a while hits him. “What’s that supposed to mean?!” Panic sparks heavy in his chest.

“I took him out to a rainforest—a *different* one, to be clear—took him up above the treetops, so he couldn’t find shelter, and then I waited, for, you know, weather,” Dream says simply.

Fear and rage burn hot, but he’s powerless. Tommy hurls a potato at Dream’s head as hard as he can. It hits its mark, causing Dream to stumble back, but no more damage than that.

“You killed him?! What the fuck is wrong with you?! You didn’t have to *do* that!” Tommy shouts at him, the chain pulling taut, making the bruises on his stomach ache, but he wants to tear Dream to pieces once more. Breaking him down had been so slow, but Tommy returns to anger in a moment.

“Tommy, I didn’t have a choice!” Dream snaps. “And whose fault is that, huh?! You should’ve never gotten him involved!”

Tommy ignores him, turning and yanking on the chain anchored to the wall, and it’s like suddenly the past month hasn’t happened. All of that progress, down the drain, because Dream got lazy, he forgot who he was trying to manipulate. Revealing cruelty against someone Tommy cares for might as well be a big undo button on Tommy’s docility.

“Goddamnit.” Dream sighs. “I know you want to throw a tantrum, but you *have* been making progress, so, I’m going to reward you anyway,” Dream approaches him, and Tommy immediately lets go of the chain and turns, waiting for him to get in reach, so Dream stops, unfazed and unamused. He takes out his crossbow.

“Oh, you cheap fucking coward—!” Tommy hits the ground, a crossbow bolt between his eyes. Dream hasn’t had to kill him in a while.

Dream knows he was careless, he shouldn’t have explained Ghostbur to him, but Dream knows how to fix this. He *knows* it will. He grabs Tommy’s corpse and drags him out into the hall.

~

Tommy hasn’t been dead in a while. His first impulse is to look for Wilbur, but it seems his brother is at least alive. Then, a far newer impulse, a want he knows to be genuine this time, he looks for Ghostbur.

“Ghostbur!” Tommy calls into the dark. He knows there is no distance to be yelled across where he will be heard, but he finds it is a useful way to manifest his wanting. There is no reply. “Okay, okay that doesn’t mean he’s... he’s *gone*, maybe Ghostbur isn’t thinking proper right now or he can’t remember, and he has to want to see you too, or... or something.”

It’s a useless consolation. Tommy knows it’s something worse than that, it has to be, because it was *Dream’s* doing. Of course that sick bastard would figure out a way to hurt a ghost...

“*Wake up.*”

Tommy returns with a start, he tries to move, to sit up sharply, but finds he’s once more efficiently chained down, which, was probably a smart move. “Where the fuck are you?!” Tommy snarls. “Come’re I’ll tear you to fucking pieces!” He’s in Dream’s library, chained to a block, and Dream watches him struggle without a care. And then Tommy sees what he is holding. He stops struggling, anger drained in a moment and replaced by something far more desperate. “What is that?” He says hoarsely.

“You don’t recognize it? Last I checked, it was pretty important to you,” Dream twirls the vinyl between his fingers. “I mean, I won’t screw around, it *is* very important to you. I *told* you this would be something good! It’s a reward for your *past behavior*, Tommy, not your little fit just now.”

“Oh... okay...” Tommy isn’t really listening to him, staring at the disc.

“When do you think was the last time you actually heard *Cat* ?” Dream tilts his head, mulling it over.

“Dunno...” Tommy is only watching Dream’s hands, watching the disc.

“A long time, I bet,” Dream steps closer, and Tommy doesn’t struggle, he follows Dream as he walks around him, and Tommy then realizes what block he’s been chained *to*.

“You’re gonna play it?” Tommy says disbelievingly, staring at the jukebox behind him in awe.

“No, I thought we’d just *look at it*, Tommy,” Dream says teasingly. He puts the disc in the jukebox, before returning to the wall he had been leaning against in front of Tommy, watching him, smiling.

Tommy’s chest hurts very badly. He tries to dig the dirt deeper underneath his fingernails, he does it until it hurts, but it doesn’t work. Whatever feeling is now blooming inside of him is *not* panic. Maybe grief would be closer, but that’s not it either. Tommy feels *restored*. This is one tiny broken piece inside of him that has been glued back into place, but it’s still less broken than he was before. He leans back against the jukebox and despite knowing Dream is right there, knowing he still must remain vigilant, Tommy closes his eyes and allows the vibrations to thrum through his chest, far more comforting than a heartbeat.

It ends.

Tommy staves off full blown hysterics, even as he feels a sob caught in his throat. He opens his eyes. Dream hasn't moved. Tommy cannot stop himself, voice weak and pleading.

"P-Play it again?"

Dream circles the jukebox and Tommy waits with leadened dread for Dream to say no, to dismiss him, to tuck the disc away in his enderchest, or even the sound of shattering vinyl, instead, something far worse.

"Sure, Tommy. Here."

And the disc begins to play again, and Tommy is doomed, but right now he doesn't feel doomed, he feels like he *needs* this, like this matters far more than food or water. He hadn't always been like this. He had always loved the discs, but this feeling is beyond natural, it is a symptom of months alone in Limbo and that disease alone. This is not the way Tommy had once loved the discs, it is a corruption of it, love turned to hunger, joy festered into addiction. Tommy has enough rationale left to realize something, to admit to a cruel truth underneath the contentment still humming in his chest. He doesn't think this can be called playing along anymore, because this need haunting him, he's not pretending. In this moment, however hard he tries to resist the thought, he's grateful.

Chapter End Notes

WE ARE SO BACK BABY

I would've had this posted yesterday but alas. bless the ao3 team for their hard work o7

Anyway. Thoughts? :)

Chapter 39

Chapter Notes

CW: violence. much violence. gore. corpses. god complexes, dehumanization, Dream being creepy. Ya know.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Dream's patience wanes. He played the disc many times, but Tommy could have kept listening to it forever. Within the hour, Dream stops. It goes quiet.

"Play it again," Tommy mumbles like clockwork, but this time, the music doesn't come back. Instead, all he hears is Dream taking the disc from the jukebox, and the creak of an enderchest opening. "Play it again," he tries again.

"I think that's enough for today, Tommy," Dream says.

Tommy feels the panic immediately rising in his chest. "No, no you have to play it again. You *have* to." Tommy stares up at him, tugging against the chains, imploring and desperate.

Dream stares back, without anger or even malice, more like pity. "No, Tommy. I don't."

"*Please*, please, just play it one more time!" Tommy feels like the air in the room has grown thinner, his pleading harder to manage between gasps.

"Tommy," Dream sighs, crouching down in front of him. "If I do that, I know you'll keep asking. I know it's hard, but you need to stop sometime, right?"

Tommy keeps struggling against the chains, not even to hurt Dream, but just because being trapped like this is deepening his panic even more. "Please," Tommy says breathlessly, eyes watering and Dream's sympathetic face blurring in his vision.

"No, Tommy. I'm gonna leave you here for a bit to calm down. I don't think you're ready to move just yet, but I'll be back, okay?" Dream stands.

"Just... just one more time?" Tommy tries again, tugging uselessly against the chain, watching Dream leave.

"No," Dream laughs. "Aw, it's gonna be okay. I have a feeling if I moved you now you'd freak out and try to hurt me, so, I'm just gonna give you some time alone, okay?"

"No, no I won't, I promise, I just—" Tommy chokes back tears. "Please don't leave me here alone, i-if you won't play it, I don't wanna be here anymore, *please*."

Dream frowns, considering this. “If you try anything, Tommy, I’ll have to hurt Wilbur, you know that, right?”

Tommy nods fiercely.

Dream returns, watching him carefully, but nonetheless, he unchains him. The moment the weight falls away, Dream grabs onto his arm, holding him tightly in place, as if still expecting Tommy to lunge at him. Tommy doesn’t. He stands when Dream pulls him to his feet, and he follows. Dream takes him back to his cell. The chain around his waist remains, hooked back into the wall.

“I... I still have to go, though, Tommy. Are you... are you gonna be okay here alone?” Dream asks cautiously.

“Oh,” Tommy sits back on his bed, like a disappointed child. “Okay. Yeah, fine.”

“I’ll be back soon. Before you get hungry again, at least.”

“I’m always hungry.”

“Well, *more* hungry, then,” Dream smiles, amused and poorly bottling satisfaction at how quickly Tommy has grown weak.

“Okay.”

Dream turns to leave.

“Can I listen to the disc again sometime? I mean, if I can’t see Wilbur, y’know?”

Dream pretends to consider this. “Maybe later.” He leaves.

Tommy doesn’t move. Not for a long time. For a moment, he tries to hum *Cat*, rocking slightly, curled into a ball and knees tucked into his chest, before he stops. He finds the sound of his own voice eerie. He shakes his head sharply. “No... that’s not...” He doesn’t know what thought he was trying to voice aloud, what resistance he was trying to offer or to whom. He focuses on the sound of his own breathing for a time, it is shaky and too loud, even as he keeps his mouth shut tightly, as if holding back a scream.

Tommy bolts to his feet, goes over to the chest, and grabs a blank book. He kneels beside the bed, using it almost as a desk, and he begins to write; first with urgency, then with precision, then with an ease almost meditative. He doesn’t even have to draw blood to focus anymore, and despite it having been days, even weeks, since he’d last written it, it returns to him, outlined so clearly in his head. When he finishes that book, he sets it aside, he returns to the chest, and he grabs another. His knees begin to ache, as does his hand, but that is nothing compared to the thought of being alone with his own thoughts. So he writes.

Dream doesn’t return for a long time. Tommy writes six books total. He doesn’t stop. When his hand hurts so badly he can’t move it anymore, he holds it steady with his left and tries to keep going. When the cell door finally opens, Tommy jumps up and rushes over to

him, Dream's hand immediately goes to his axe, but he's even more bewildered when instead of attacking him, Tommy offers him a book from trembling, ink stained hands.

"I wrote them. I wrote— I wrote a *lot*," Tommy offers it to him hopefully.

Dream pushes it away slowly, back toward him, cautious. "That's... that's good, Tommy. I'll... I'll bring you extra food later." Tommy accepts this gloomily, returning the book to the chest with care. "I told you writing books got you more food. Nothing more."

"Yeah, yeah..." Tommy mutters.

"I'm still proud of you, Tommy. Do you want to go to the farm now?" Dream offers, watching Tommy carefully.

"Fine," Tommy stares at Dream for a moment. Something is off. He's not wearing a helmet, *or* a mask.

Dream unchains him from the wall. "Come on. We've made so much progress too!" He seems to sense Tommy's staring. "Do you not like gardening?"

"No, no the gardening is fine, Dream," Tommy says quickly, his first thought being Dream finding some far less pleasant activities for them to try. "I just... just miss Wilbur, is all."

Dream gives him a doubtful look as he guides him down the hall, a firm hand on his shoulder. "Do you miss Wilbur, or do you want your disc back?"

Tommy shrugs, allowing himself to be pushed along, trying to bury the troubling thoughts rising from Dream without a helmet. "Dunno... both I guess."

"Right," Dream sounds so scolding.

It's become routine now. Tommy gardens while Dream digs out the room. It's slow going with the mining fatigue, so while the room has grown larger, it doesn't yet seem unfeasible. Tommy has planted more crops, and it does feel rewarding, however much he wishes it wasn't.

Tommy pauses. "Can I... can I have some food now?" He asks. "I don't... I don't wanna just eat carrots, y'know?"

Dream smiles. "Sure, Tommy." He offers Tommy dried fish and a baked potato. He then turns around to actually lock the chain to the wall. Tommy just stares at him. Dream has his back to him, he's not wearing a helmet. Alarm bells are going off in the back of his head, because this is *too easy*.

"Is this a trick?" Tommy asks unsteadily, almost an accusation. "Are you... are you trying to see if I'll hurt you?"

Dream turns back to face him, as if puzzled, and *still* without a helmet. "What makes you say that, Tommy?"

“You... you don’t have your helmet.”

“No,” Dream tilts his head, assessing him, and Tommy feels like his hair stands on end.

“S-So... is it? A trick?” Tommy buries the impulse to step back.

“Maybe.” Dream steps closer. He steps within *reach*. “But you didn’t, did you? Good job, Tommy. I mean, this right now, your behavior recently, you writing the books, I think you might be finally fixed.” Dream reaches out and ruffles his hair. Tommy doesn’t flinch away. Tommy refuses to think on the implications, charging ahead toward his far more desperate want.

“Does that mean I get to see Wilbur?”

“Not *immediately*, but I’ll... consider it,” Dream humors him, and Tommy believes it, even though he knows he shouldn’t.

“Okay.” Tommy doesn’t argue, he just remains frozen, staring at Dream, stomach twisted in knots, alarm bells ringing he can’t quite place. There is no coherency to the fear, instead it almost feels like the buzz of static rising in pitch until there’s this sharp, high whine *screaming* at him to do something, to do anything. Tommy turns back to one of the planter beds. Dream returns to mining out another row of the wall. Tommy kneels down, hands buried in the dirt, it digging in underneath his fingernails.

Tommy hadn’t wanted to kill Dream. That wasn’t a resisted impulse, nor anything buried, he had seen Dream vulnerable, and his first thought had been wariness, fear. He had felt no desire to kill Dream, merely a suspicion of how easy it might have been to do so. And then he had spoken, he had gotten Dream to raise his guard, and he had accepted Dream’s praise.

Tommy feels like his heart is going to beat out of his chest, his mouth has gone very dry, because interrupting his spiral, underneath the earth, and now wrapped in his fist, Tommy finds a rock. He doesn’t move, he remains frozen, fixated on the dirt. Tommy hasn’t been lucky for a long time. This cannot be happening.

Is this another trap? He’s trying to trick you. He’s trying to make you act. Then he’s gonna hurt you for it.

Tommy feels a strange storm of adrenaline and calm roiling within him. He slowly stands, holding tightly onto the rock, shifting it in his grip until he feels a jagged groove along one side and wishes there were any gods left for him to thank. The rock is big, too big to keep hidden in his fist, and heavy too. He wonders if it’s a broken off piece of stone brick, or maybe Dream had accidentally funneled it down here when he’d brought down dirt for the farm. Tommy turns around just as slowly, wired like a spring. Dream is still facing away from him, still mining the wall, still without a helmet, still vulnerable. Tommy takes one step closer, wary and terrified out of sheer desperation. This has to work. This *has* to. Tommy takes another step closer. Dream doesn’t hear him. Tommy doesn’t understand how, he feels like Dream *always* knows, but not this time. Surely this is a trick, surely he’s going to fail. But then again, why not? Why *couldn’t* he do it? Dream is just a mortal, and Tommy knows how easily people can die.

“Dream?” Tommy says, voice small and unsteady. He holds the rock with two hands in front of him. He raises it.

Dream starts to turn around. “Yeah, Tommy–?”

Before Dream can face him, Tommy brings the stone down against Dream’s temple. Dream staggers, Tommy sees blood. Dream stares at him with wide, stunned eyes. Tommy brings the stone down again. Dream tries to grab him, to catch his wrist before he can hit him again, but Tommy slams into him with all of his strength so he hits the wall behind him. Tommy brings the rock down again, and Dream is sluggish to react. There’s blood pouring from his left temple. Dream tries to swing at him, slow and poorly aimed, and Tommy grabs onto Dream’s wrist instead, twisting it as hard as he can and pulling him forward so Dream stumbles to the side, and Tommy brings the rock down again.

Dream hits the back wall and starts to stand up, fury evident, but surely some fear as well. Tommy simply hits him again. Dream hits the ground and Tommy digs his bony knees into Dream’s netherite chestplate even as it makes his legs bleed, and he brings the rock down again. His movements are haphazard and inconsistent, a wild cacophony of movement as he bashes the rock against Dream’s temple, his forehead, his nose, grazing against his ear, before back again right between his eyes. Dream reaches up to push Tommy off of him, he grabs at Tommy’s face, eventually grabbing and holding tightly to Tommy’s ear, yanking Tommy toward the ground, but hitting him with the rock a few more times gets him to let go. Dream is still fumbling toward Tommy, trying to get him off, but Tommy can’t even see his face anymore underneath the blood so he knows Dream can’t see him. Tommy grabs onto Dream’s thumb next time he blindly swings at him, and *yanks* as hard as he can. He hears bone crack, and with the other hand he brings the stone down again. Dream stops trying to push him off. Tommy once more holds the stone with both hands, raising it high above his head before bringing it down against Dream’s face with a dull *thunk* of stone against bone. Again, a *thunk*. Again. *Thunk*. Again. A *crack* of bone breaking.

Tommy stumbles, the rock hits the ground and Tommy stops putting his weight against Dream’s chest. He falls to the side, breathing ragged and gasping. He stays on the ground, bloody hands pressed to the stone as he tries not to collapse

“D-Dream..?” Tommy says hoarsely. The crushed skull beside him does not reply. Tommy sits back and stares at the corpse beside him. He stares, and he can have no delusions that Dream will sit back up and hurt him, not with his skull collapsed inward, but he stares anyway. He struggles to process. Dream is dead. He’s dead and not getting back up. He feels like he should be reacting more, breaking down, maybe gloating. He doesn’t.

Something else comes to the forefront of his mind now, his heart skips a beat and his stomach drops, as one trembling, exhausted, bloody hand goes to the chain around his waist.

“*Fuck*, oh f-fuck, oh you’re so fucking stupid you’re so fucking stupid–” Tommy scrambles back over to the corpse. He won’t despawn, so searching his inventory will have to be a bit more personal as he rummages through the corpse’s toolbelt. Stone. Tools. Fucking potatoes. A book. A lever, but no keys. Tommy doesn’t understand. Did Dream keep them in his enderchest?! Tommy doesn’t fucking remember, and it doesn’t fucking *matter* because Dream is dead as fuck and Tommy is *stuck*.

Tommy cannot breathe. His hands tremble as he tries to break through metal, his hands still slick with blood. Tommy gasps for air, struggling to pull the chain away, even as it digs in sharply to the bruises, until it hurts too badly and he stops. Tommy gets weak, for a moment he just curls on the ground, choking on air like he's found another way to drown. Dream's mangled corpse blurs in his vision. Tommy cannot die here. This cannot be it, this can't be what does him in, Dream is *dead* and it's—

“*—not fucking fair, not fucking fair,*” he gasps hoarsely, tugging on his hair even as Dream's blood makes it stick between his fingers. Tommy whines, shaking his head, and forces himself to stand. He goes to where the chain is anchored to the wall. Tommy wipes the blood on his shirt, hoping to dry them, and then holds onto it tightly to the chain with both hands. He hops up so his feet are flat against the wall, all of his weight tugging on the chain. He kicks off as hard as he can. Tommy feels the chain rip through his hands sharply and hits the ground hard. “*Please!*” Tommy screams raggedly. “P-Please... please, it's not...” Dream is dead. There is no one left to hear his prayers. Tommy gets up, he grabs onto the chain again, his palms still stinging and raw, and he pulls as hard as he can. Nothing. Tommy still cannot breathe. He cannot black out right now, he *can't* spiral.

You can't do anything else either. Tommy feels a whimpering laugh bubble up as he backs against the wall, turns around, and sprints towards the door.

Tommy hits the ground hard, and part of him wonders if he's just fucked up his organs bad enough to kill himself, at which point he rolls over and vomits into the nearest planter bed.

“I can't...” he says weakly. “Can't do it...” Tommy gets up anyway. He tugs on the chain one more desperate time, then he turns. “*Wil!*” He cups his hands over his mouth. “*Wilbur, please! Wil, help me!*” Tommy falls to his knees, arms wrapped around himself as he sobs. “I can't... I can't do it... I can't... somebody help me... *please help me... Wil!*”

There is no reply.

“Come on... come *on*, Tommy, think of *something*, think of fucking anything...” Tommy rocks slightly, tugging on his hair once more. “H-How do I get out?! How do I... How do I get out...” Tommy scans the room frantically, as if a key will magically appear to him. He spots the grave. “The pipe! I... I get the pipe, and I...” Tommy doesn't know what he plans to do. “You... Dream gave you a stone hoe. It... it could be somewhere here, but it—” Tommy laughs, high and panicked. “It will just fucking *break!* You don't need a *hoe*, you need a fucking p—” Tommy gasps. “Pickaxe! Oh my god, holy fucking shit—” He scrambles back over to the corpse, because *of course*, Dream has a fucking netherite pickaxe on him.

“Ha!” Tommy kisses the side of the handle loudly, “mwah! Mwah, I fucking *love you!*” He tells it reverently. He can't reach the part around his waist, but he *can* break it from the length connecting him to the wall. With the mining fatigue, it takes several swings, but *finally*, the chain breaks. Tommy bolts for the exit. He holds onto the pickaxe in one hand, he keeps the lever in his inventory. “Wil!” He screams with frantic, desperate hope. “Wilbur!” He realizes, with one more bite of panic, he has no clue where his brother could be. Doors are hidden behind blank walls, and there are many long corridors with many places for secrets. “Wil! Wil, make a sound! I can't— I can't find you! Wilbur!”

What if he can't scream? What if he's dead right now, and you will never be able to find his corpse?

Tommy turns sharply down the corridor of his cell. He knows he won't be there, but he looks in the neighboring one anyway. It's empty. Tommy looks further down the corridor. The two blocks at the end are carved stone, rather than stone brick. Tommy comes closer. He has the lever. Tommy scans the wall of stone, looking for any divot. Tommy places the lever and prays.

"Wil?!" Tommy runs forward into the dull blue light of the sea lantern and stops dead in his tracks at the sight of his brother's body hanging from the ceiling. His first impulsive, miserable thought is, "*oh. He found a way to kill himself again,*" before his eyes adjust to the light and he realizes Wilbur is dangling from his wrists. That doesn't necessarily mean he's alive. Tommy follows the chain to the wall and slams the pickaxe through one of the links until Wilbur's body hits the ground with a splash. "Wil?! Wil, can you hear me?"

Blood looks black underneath the light of the sea lanterns, and Wilbur is drenched in it. It crusts from his nose and around his lips, one eye swollen shut, one ear covered in blood as well, and that is only from what Tommy can see as he cradles Wilbur's face. "Wil?" He almost hopes his brother is dead. It will be far easier to revive him and let him heal a little, but Tommy's luck has run short, as Wilbur flinches in his arms, groaning, one eye struggling open.

"Oh... h-hey Tommy..." Wilbur scans the rest of the cell. "Where..?"

"Dead," Tommy says giddily, pulling his brother up, supporting his weight as he seems utterly limp. "He's fucking *dead* Wil! I fucking destroyed him!"

Wilbur's one eye widens and he clings onto Tommy's arm, his wrists still bound together, both swollen and bloody. "He..."

"I killed him," Tommy says softly, a promise and an offering between now godless people. Tommy grounds himself once more in his brother's battered face. "Fucking shit, Wil, you look... oh fuck, it's been... it's been *weeks* and he wouldn't let me see you I didn't know how you were, he *said* you were okay and I *believed* him—" Tommy rambles desperately, holding onto Wilbur tightly until he cries out. "Sorry! I'm sorry."

"S-Shoulders... shoulders hurt the worst," Wilbur says hoarsely.

"Yeah, no fuckin' wonder," Tommy mutters, looking up at the ceiling with a wince. "Come on, lets get you the fuck out of here," Tommy grabs Wilbur around his waist and starts to drag him toward the stairs.

"N-No, no put me down *put me down!*" Wilbur screams urgently, eyes tightly shut. "F-Fuck... it *hurts*, I can't..."

"Right, right, I'll—" Tommy helps Wilbur lean back against the wall. "I'll be right back, okay? Just like, just a minute," Tommy scrambles back up the stairs and back to the farm. He goes to Dream's body, grabbing the book from him, but then he hesitates. There's blood

on the binding, which is familiar, but... that copy of the journal burned. *But why would there be blood on a revive book, Tommy?* Tommy doesn't think about it, but he stops by his cell as well and grabs one of the written copies he had just made.

He returns to his brother, and he hesitates.

Wilbur squints at the book, glancing from it to Tommy's worried expression. "Do you... do you want my blessing?" He rasps. Tommy doesn't respond. Wilbur sighs. "Tommy, a lot of things are broken. A-And I've been like this for a long time. *I want it to be over. Please.*"

"How?" Tommy asks weakly.

Wilbur glances at the pickaxe.

Tommy's stomach churns. "Right. Wait, fuck, I don't... I wrote this, it doesn't have the burning shit in it."

"I have..." Wilbur tries to pull something out of his pocket, but his hand is stiff and swollen. "Pocket," Wilbur mumbles. "Got matches in my pocket..."

"Where'd you get *matches?*" Tommy retrieves them, realizing with a shiver that Wilbur's clothes are damp not with water, but with blood.

"Dream. For... for cigarettes. Before he..." Wilbur trails off, but Tommy can hazard a guess at what he meant.

"Right," Tommy feels frozen, holding the pickaxe.

"Hitting the ground made it worse, Tommy, I would... I'd really appreciate if you'd hurry up," Wilbur says hoarsely.

Death doesn't mean anything anymore. There had been a time where Tommy had yanked a spear out of his brother's chest, but hadn't been able to bring himself to actually put him out of his misery, and another time where Punz had lied and Tommy had been convinced he'd beaten his brother to death. He has fewer hangups now.

Tommy still hesitates. "Sorry."

"I'm asking you to."

"Fuck..." Tommy wants to close his eyes, but he could put Wilbur into a lot more pain if he misses, so he doesn't. He brings the pickaxe down on his skull, and Wilbur goes limp. Tommy buries a gag at the sight of his brother's battered skull. It's a far more elegant wound than what Tommy left Dream with. Tommy first opens the book he'd taken from Dream.

He sees handwriting, ordinary handwriting, and shudders. He puts it away and takes out his own written copy.

He fumbles to light the match but the book burns easily once it catches. He has a moment of fierce terror at the thought that maybe he had messed up every book, maybe he's forgotten,

maybe he just killed his brother for good. *Please, Wil. Please just give me Wil.*

Tommy winces as he hears Wilbur's bones crack back into place. Wilbur gasps. He lays flat on his back in the water still, taking shaking, deep breaths.

"You... you alright?" Tommy steps hesitantly forward.

"Better..."

"Can you stand?"

Wilbur tries to sit up, slowly with a wince. "Not broken anymore, I don't think, but... hurts. Still hurts..."

"Come on, I got you, man," Tommy takes Wilbur's arm, pulling it around his shoulder. "I'll... I'll get you food and shit, yeah?"

"Water..."

"Water! I'll definitely get you some water," Tommy winces, struggling to support Wilbur's weight, but the past weeks of consistent food, of working on something, Tommy has gotten a shred healthier. It makes it harder to see that Wilbur definitely hasn't.

"Thanks..." Wilbur mumbles when Tommy sets him down on the edge of his bed. Tommy gets him water in his little tin cup, which Wilbur drinks desperately. Resurrection is limited, his bones are unbroken, but dehydration remains.

There's quiet for a time, Tommy anxious and not wanting to force Wilbur to talk, so he just brings him water and later food from the farm. Wilbur sighs, leaning against the wall, eyes closed. His eye is no longer swollen shut, but he's still covered in blood. Wilbur takes another shuddering breath, and Tommy realizes he's fending off tears.

"Wil, it's okay," Tommy says softly.

That breaks him. Wilbur buries his face in his hands, sobs trembling through once broken and now merely bruised ribs. Tommy doesn't hug his brother, not yet. First he returns to the sink, and dampens a rag.

"I got you, Wil. Let me... I can help," Tommy waits for permission.

Wilbur opens his eyes, shakily wiping away tears. He nods.

Tommy begins to wipe the blood from his face. Wilbur assesses Tommy more carefully now, puzzled to find his brother is far less bloody. Only his hands are stained with it, his face spattered with it, and Wilbur realizes it must be Dream's blood. Tommy looks different. His cheeks are less sallow, his bones poke out still, but not so sharply it looks painful as it had before. Wilbur, for all his suffering, can't help but feel relieved.

It's slow going, Tommy getting up to wring out the rag as it becomes thick with blood, but Tommy, not quite in his nature, nonetheless incredibly *him*, is careful and quiet and gentle.

“Are you... are you alright?” Wilbur asks.

“Me?” Tommy looks startled by the question. “Look at *you*, Wil. I just fuckin’ killed *Dream* I’m... I’m on a goddamn cloud,” he tries for a grin.

“Right,” Wilbur smiles back, not believing him.

Tommy can’t stop himself from inquiring, he knows Wilbur won’t hold it against him. “He told me... he told me he was treating you okay.”

Wilbur shuts his eyes, knees tucked into his chest as he takes a deep breath. “I dunno... he was, at first, and then... on a fucking *dime*, he started hurting me for no fucking reason! He’d... he’d turn up at random fucking hours and just started—” Wilbur stops, getting choked up, but once he starts again it’s almost like he can’t stop. “F-First just hitting me, beating me bloody and leaving me there to bleed out, but eventually he started... he’d get out a knife, a-and... and then... god, I dunno how long it’s been, it feels like it’s been fucking weeks, he had me strung up from the ceiling, a literal fucking punching bag, and t-then when he got bored of just doing that, he’d carve into me, he’d *toy* with me, swinging my body back toward a blade and he’d laugh when I tried to move or get out of the way, and my arms hurt so fucking bad, it made my whole body hurt, it... it made it hard to *breathe*, somehow, fucking *christ*—” Wilbur buries his face in his hands. “And he’d just leave me hanging there. F-For hours, for *days*, felt like, and sometimes I think the strain of just that would kill me. Or... or I’d just bleed out or something, I dunno. I dunno...” Wilbur finally stops, he doesn’t look at Tommy, fixated on the agonizing memories of the past weeks.

Tommy knows it won’t comfort him, but he can’t stop himself, voice shaking, from telling him, “it’s my fault.”

“What?” Wilbur looks up at him sharply. “What the hell are you talking about, Tommy? It’s not *your fault*—”

“Cept it is, Wil. He *told* me, how I acted determined how he treated *you*. A-And...” Tommy connects some horrible, vicious dots. “Whenever I freaked out, he never hurt me, he always left me alone to... to calm down. He’d get pissed, and he’d *leave* because t-then he’d go hurt *you*, every time he wanted to hurt me, he hurt *you*. Fuck, Wil, I am so fucking sorry, I’m so sorry, I didn’t know but I *did* know ‘cause he fucking *told* me what would happen—”

“*Tommy*,” Wilbur puts a gentle hand on his shoulder. “Dream did this, not you.”

Tommy tries to calm. He knows this won’t help either of them, so he should focus on what will. “We’ve got to bring him back. To... to figure out how the fuck we’re getting out of here.”

“Right. How... how many copies of the book do you have?”

“Five more. And a bunch of blanks I can use. If we run out of matches, there should still be the lava in the dark cell.”

Wilbur nods. “We should... how do you want to do this, then?”

“What, me?” Tommy looks surprised. “You’re the *general*, aren’t ya?”

“Yeah, but I’ve been following your lead since getting here, and it’s not led me wrong yet,” Wilbur sounds amused.

“Yeah, ‘cause I’m an expert on surviving *Dream*, not on much else...” Tommy mutters. “But fine, you’re right. I am the wisest man here,” he says haughtily. “Help me drag his corpse into the dome—are you up for that? If you need more time to rest-”

Wilbur stands with a sigh. “Nah, I’m ready.”

Wilbur hesitates for a moment at the sight of Dream’s corpse and profoundly crushed skull, he eyes the bloody rock beside him with something like awe.

“First, help me get his armor off. And we’ll take all his other shit as well. I dunno how to unlock the chains, he doesn’t have any keys on him, but there’s rope around here somewhere. We’ll tie ‘im down good,” Tommy starts undoing Dream’s chestplate and Wilbur follows with the chausses. That done, Tommy proceeds. “I get his arms, you get his legs?”

The two of them drag Dream out into the dome. Wilbur doesn’t ask why Tommy had wanted him there.

“You sit tight, Wil. I can get us rope.” Tommy proceeds busily, leaving Wilbur to sit on top of a chest and rest and try to ignore the grotesque figure thrown carelessly into the water.

“You should put on his chest plate, Tommy. In case he breaks free,” Wilbur points out when Tommy returns.

Tommy hums some agreement, focused instead on tying Dream’s arms and legs tightly. Tommy assesses what he’s gathered from his scavenging. He has Dream’s axe, his crossbow, as well as several nasty knives that makes Tommy remember the trails of blood down Wilbur’s body with a shiver. Wilbur helps him put on the chestplate and at Tommy’s insistence, Wilbur wears the chausses. Tommy checks the knots on Dream’s wrists twice. He tries to name the foreign energy roiling underneath his skin and the closest word that comes to mind is *excitement*, but he doesn’t know if he likes that much.

Tommy goes to get out a revive book, and hesitates when in his inventory he also finds the other book.

“Hold on a sec, Wil,” Tommy murmurs as he steps a few paces away from the corpse to take it out.

“What’s that?” Wilbur catches on immediately. “Oh shit.”

Tommy opens it.

“Hold on,” Wilbur continues. “Shouldn’t we burn it? Tommy, come on, don’t... don’t look at that, what good will it do?” Wilbur comes closer to him, and Tommy steps back with a snarl, holding it close.

“It’s mine!” Tommy stares at Wilbur, as if daring him to take it.

Wilbur steps back, helpless and apologetic. He shrugs. “What... what good will it do?” He tries again.

“I don’t *care*,” Tommy hisses, settling on top of one of the chests. “He... he gave up on research, on the... the testing revival shit *ages* ago, so what the fuck was he writing about?!” He flips frantically through pages he vividly remembers, until he sees something he doesn’t.

Wilbur isn’t sure if he should join him or not, if he has the right to see it, he certainly doesn’t want to, but another part of him doesn’t want Tommy to have to read it alone. He cautiously decides to settle on the chest next to Tommy, glancing over at him, glancing at the page that Tommy is staring at, but not reading.

Tommy doesn’t read it right away, first he skims through the other pages until he gets to a blank one. There’s a *lot* of new stuff written. Tommy is trying to pretend his heart isn’t hammering in his throat.

“I shouldn’t,” Tommy says softly. “You’re right, I... I *shouldn’t*.”

“That’s up to you.”

Tommy nods mutely. He’ll read the first line. He’ll do that, and then if he wants to, he can stop.

“This is copy three. Copy two is with Tommy now, but this version is fully up to date. So far retrieval is going as planned. Wilbur is getting weaker, and when Tommy gets here, he’ll be even worse.”

“Important update: Tommy set an ultimatum. He wants a few days, either to mope with his little buddies, or to plan a way out. Either way, I’ve got my ace still up my sleeve and they’ll be there to make sure the job gets done.”

An ace up his sleeve. Punz. Of course.

It will take ages for Tommy to get caught up to the present, so he decides to skip to the most recent entry. That feels important, somehow.

“Cat broke him. Just like I knew it would.”

Tommy feels a spark of white-hot anger and undeniably shame, and he stops reading that entry, going back a page.

“He is still resistant, and obviously I can’t use Wilbur yet. The clear answer is a disc, but I think we’re beyond using just any old disc. Cat is going to destroy him for me, and then I can rebuild him, and maybe finally this fucking pacifism can end. I am stronger than my impulses, but I have every right to return to them.”

He goes back a page and tries to ignore his shame just as he tries not to overthink Dream’s promise to *rebuild* him.

"It's working relatively well. Wilbur suffices the way a tourniquet does when really you need a surgeon. He'll do for now. Tommy is confused and rebellious, but that won't last."

Tommy scowls and furiously goes back a page. He really wishes he hadn't.

"I think about hurting him all the time. Maybe I need to step back myself, because all that matters to me anymore is killing him. Breaking his will is satisfying, but the one good thing about Tommy's constant rebellion lately is I never needed to stop myself. He deserved it. Every bit of it. It feels righteous, or maybe something more than that. With the way he's been acting lately it's almost like he's egging me on, he knows this is supposed to happen, even if he'd deny it. Maybe he feels it too, the divinity of it all. The way he looks at me when the light leaves his eyes, and when my hands are what break him, the snap of his bones underneath my strength, skin splitting against my knuckles and how easy it is to throw his body across the room, and the way he goes numb to some pain but I still find ways to make him scream, it's beautiful. It's become an addiction, like Tommy with the discs. It feels important, though. His blood is still so warm no matter how anemic and weak he is. It feels restorative. Maybe that makes me sound like a vampire, but it's not like I'm drinking it, it's just watching him bleed that does it, or when his blood gets on my hands. Maybe my godhood is tied to his pain, because that's what feels the most holy, that's what separates me from humans."

I need to refocus, quit cold turkey until I get him docile again. No more hurting Tommy. Any impulses or anger I have will be controlled and put on Wilbur instead. Once Tommy finally breaks, I'll show him what I've done to his brother, and offer to let them trade places. Then I can go back to it. As long as I can prove to myself that I don't need to hurt him, I'll be able to make him bleed again. I need him docile. It's like something is missing when he stops begging for mercy. Wilbur just doesn't cut it. It's something about Tommy. I've known that, but it's never felt more true when Wilbur bleeds and screams with all the hysteria and desperation of his brother, and it just doesn't feel the same. He's not my first reborn. I gave Tommy life first. Both of their suffering belongs to me, but Tommy will always be special—"

Tommy snaps the book shut. He fumbles for the revive book.

"Tommy?!" Wilbur follows. "Tommy, are you... what happened?! What did you see?"

Tommy just shakes his head. He gets out a knife, before remembering he needs to make Dream alive again first. He tries to think it through. "Wait, wait, just... I'll be right back, gimme a sec," Tommy wants something else. He's blinded by grief and fury and disgust, but he's also almost methodical. So he goes to the poison room, and finds two bottles remaining in one of the chests before running back, this strange sense of urgency like doing this can somehow pry himself out of Dream's brain. He coats the blade in the poison, setting aside the bottle carefully. He pauses once more to put on Dream's netherite boots, not as armor, but as a weapon he knows well.

Tommy's hands tremble as he gets out the book, he just barely manages to light a match, and with a visceral hatred and pain, he says those words: *"Wake up."*

Dream's skull is restored in a way Wilbur could only describe as it being eroded in reverse. It's not a pretty sight. Dream returns with a gasp, struggling to adjust to air once more in his

lungs. He blinks blearily, dazed and confused as he grasps his new predicament. Tommy doesn't waste time on words. He grabs Dream by the hair and slams his head back against the stone. Dream doesn't sit back up, his eyes unsteady as his consciousness grows spotted. Tommy stares at that man's monstrous and ordinary fucking face and he can't stop himself from plunging the poison-coated blade through his cheek. Dream screams, before choking on blood. The act of screaming seems to cut the knife still in his face into his tongue. Tommy does not merely rip the blade out, he *tears*. Dream's cheek is torn open to his mouth. Dream's scream is gargled and strange. Wilbur looks away. Tommy staggers to his feet, blood pounding in his ears, he kicks him right in the hole in his face, and he must kick him too hard, because once more Dream's skull caves in.

Immediately, Tommy reaches for another book. Wilbur just watches. Dream breathes again, and the moment he does, there's a knife in his chest. Tommy doesn't react to his screams, he merely rips the knife out and brings it down again, and again, and again. The blade is small, and it still takes a while for Tommy to hit anything fatal, but Dream stops screaming relatively soon, it replaced by this awful, tormented choking noise as Tommy must have pierced a lung. Tommy doesn't stop, though. He stares at Dream, expression maybe too calm in his concentration. He keeps going, he brings the knife down over and over. Dream is definitely dead by now. Tommy brings the knife down again. The center of Dream's chest has become so porous with holes it's an open cavity. Tommy brings the knife down again. Tommy slips forward, the knife running out of things to stick up straight from, and almost puts his palm onto the wound, or rather *into* the wound. He catches himself at the last second, sitting back and yanking the knife out with him. He raises the knife again.

Wilbur puts a gentle hand on his arm, it at least gets Tommy to pause. "Tommy... Tommy, he's dead. Been dead for a minute."

Tommy's voice is ragged, breathing hard from the strain, but he speaks, still staring at Dream. "I'm not done. I'm not done with— I'm not done. W-We bring him back... I'll bring him back, a-and I do it again. I can do it again..."

A pause. He still doesn't look over at Wilbur.

"You look exhausted, Tommy. Maybe you could... you could just take a break. You probably need food and water too," Wilbur says gently.

"Okay. Okay, you can do that," Tommy finally looks away from Dream's corpse, fumbling for a revived book. "I'm gonna... I'm gonna bring him back and... and do it again..."

Wilbur doesn't want to let him continue, but he doesn't think he has the right to tell him that this cannot be good for him. He tries another way. "But... we need information, don't we? Or for him to use his comm? Right?"

"Nah," Tommy shakes his head, struggling with a match as his hands are so wet with blood. "We'll deal with all that later, Wil."

Wilbur doesn't know what to do. "Tommy..."

“You said you trusted me to decide shit, right?” Tommy pauses, match still unlit. He looks over at his brother, eyes fierce and unnerving.

Wilbur nods. He means it, even as it scares him to see Tommy like this.

“Then you go get food and shit, and...” Tommy goes to wipe his nose before stopping, as his arm is spattered so heavily with blood. “I’ve got to... to keep doing this, alright?” *I’ve got to*. Like Tommy doesn’t have a choice. Wilbur thinks maybe Tommy *doesn’t* have a choice.

Wilbur hesitates, unsure if he’s about to make a mistake. “Can I take it? The journal.”

“I don’t care,” Tommy says it so painfully, Wilbur doesn’t believe him.

Wilbur nods, grabbing it from the chest where Tommy had dropped it. “I’ll... I’ll get some... some food from the farm,” Wilbur isn’t sure why he feels the need to make an excuse. He goes to leave, the book held in his hands like something powerful, which maybe he can’t deny the stupid thing *is* powerful, maybe as powerful as the book Tommy is currently burning. Wilbur knows it’s more than just what Tommy read that pushed him to this, but this book had incited something. Wilbur doesn’t even know where to begin with telling Tommy he should stop, so he just goes to the farm. He hears when Dream starts to scream again, and he doesn’t look back.

Wilbur doesn’t get food immediately. He walks over to the grave and looks down into it. *Maybe we put him here next*. Wilbur settles beside the grave, legs folded underneath him, and gets out the book. He hesitates, brushing over the pages. Tommy had gone to the back of the book. That’s where the horror had been, so Wilbur will witness it too.

Wilbur’s horror rises in a way different to Tommy’s, far less personal, far more heartbroken. He had been strung up and beaten bloody these past weeks, and that existence *almost* feels preferable to Dream thinking about him the way he thinks about Tommy. Because the *point*, Wilbur realizes, was not to record data from experimenting with death, but rather experimenting with *Tommy*. Constantly, the journal just goes on and on, *Tommy Tommy Tommy*.

How his brain works, how his brain breaks, what Wilbur is worth to him, what he still shows fear about.

Then Dream started writing scripture. And the book becomes Tommy *and* scripture. He thought understood Tommy’s ferocity before, but now... Wilbur knows it won’t, but he wishes the violence Tommy is currently inflicting upon Dream could fix the pain that had led to it. He doesn’t want to think about this, about the way *Dream* thinks, and he certainly wishes Tommy didn’t have to think about it either.

Some time later, Wilbur having tried to distract himself gathering food for them both, he stops, startled, because distantly Wilbur hears Tommy screaming, not in pain, but words. He sounds like he’s in pain too.

“YOU’RE A LIAR! YOU’RE A LIAR, YOU’RE A FUCKING LIAR! I FUCKING HATE YOU! I HATE YOU!”

Wilbur runs back to the dome. In the seconds this takes, Tommy has fallen silent once again, and so has Dream, his body a freshly crumpled pile of gore. This time, Tommy doesn't reach for another book. He's dropped the knife. He remains kneeling beside Dream's corpse, frozen.

"Tommy?" Wilbur tries cautiously.

Tommy flinches. Wilbur's worries are unspoken but nonetheless, Tommy knows he wants an explanation. "He, uh. He said his Limbo was the same as mine," Tommy's voice is awfully steady. He tries to wipe Dream's blood from his face and it smears more on. He isn't looking at Wilbur, still staring at the corpse.

"What?"

Tommy nods vaguely. "Said it was an empty void. And he was falling. A-And I..." Tommy laughs weakly. "I called him a liar," his voice breaks.

"Yeah, I heard that bit." Wilbur feels sick. He's horrified by the same implications now haunting Tommy. If Dream *isn't* lying, what does it mean to have an identical Limbo to someone else? Wilbur wants to tell him it's probably nothing, but he doesn't think he can.

"He's... he's a liar," Tommy says it again like doing so will make him believe it himself. Silence, until Tommy falls back away from the body, knees tucked into his chest, head buried, and bloodied hands holding onto fistfuls of his own hair. His shoulders are shaking. Wilbur sits beside him, he moves slowly. Tommy doesn't move, but he doesn't flinch either.

He puts his arm around his little brother, pulling him close against his chest. In the dome, Tommy's shuddering, keening sobs echo.

Chapter End Notes

I've been trying to figure out how to kill Dream for so long. Genuinely, how he dies has stumped me for months and months. I knew he was going to die since the beginning of course, but I could not for the life of me figure out how!!!

I think Tommy having an "Abel hits back" moment is fun ^-^

hm? what about the rest of the chapter? Don't worry about it, Dream is dead! :D

Chapter 40

Chapter Notes

CW: violence, gore, torture. It gets pretty grisly, but it's like. it's chill. because it happens to the Worst guy ever <3 and some mild child endangerment. OH and dismemberment! almost forgot that one lol.

This chapter ended up being over 17,000 words. (my typical chapters are around 4,500 if that tells you anything lol) so. get ready for a long haul!

Also, major props to the discord for inspiring a lot of this chapter, especially GayFae420/fairybitch420/fandomgodmother420 (sorry to call you out) because she is 100% responsible for all the beeduo content in this finale lol. I said no more outside world, and then she swooped in with some awesome ideas <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The sea is steady, the waves gentle as the ship rocks in the early morning light. This part of the sea is warm. They all prefer when it's warm, far better than icy, choppy seas with looming spires threatening to dash the ship to pieces. They don't often go into cold seas. Wilbur and Tommy hadn't said anything about the cold.

"You're up early," Ranboo mumbles, putting his arms loosely around Tubbo's neck, resting his chin on top of his head.

"You know. Couldn't sleep," Tubbo holds a cup of coffee in his hands. He leans back against Ranboo, but his eyes remain fixed on the horizon, scanning it, waiting for something, as he had been for every morning before for almost a year.

"Yeah, I know," Ranboo says softly. "Anything new?"

"No. Just more of the same, really," Tubbo tears his eyes from the sea and back to Ranboo. "Is Michael still asleep?"

"Yeah. I think he slept through the night, too. I was thinking we'd wake him up for breakfast in an hour or so," Ranboo shrugs, scanning the rest of the deck and standing on his tiptoes to try and see into the crow's nest. "Where's Phil?"

"I took over watch when I got up. He should be back down in his cabin," Tubbo nods back to the steps leading below deck.

"So, nothing from Techno last night?" Ranboo asks. He already knows what the answer will be, but he wants to ask anyway.

Tubbo shakes his head. “Nothing. Sapnap thought he found a path on the nether roof, but it ended up just being someone’s old portal to a Woodland Mansion.”

“Morning, guys!” Puffy yawns loudly, emerging from below deck with coffee in hand. “Nothin’ to report?”

“Nothing new, Captain,” Tubbo tells her.

She nods, also unsurprised, climbing up to the quarterdeck and the helm.

“We should anchor soon. Before we open the sails again,” Ranboo continues. “Light the portal.”

“They’re too far off to come back. Sapnap said he’d tell me once their coords are closer,” Tubbo returns to the Captain’s cabin, which Puffy had kindly conceded to the little family of three. Michael’s crib, a lovely project of Sam’s with ropes rigging it up like a hammock while the actual bed remains sturdy, sways just barely in the motion of the ship.

Tubbo lights a lantern, morning light through the windows too weak for their purposes, glancing in Michael’s direction, but the toddler won’t wake from just that. Tubbo knew Ranboo would, that’s why he had waited. He returns to their most recent map. It’s sectioned off into chunks, and on this map they’re almost entirely crossed out. They’ll probably finish this one today. Tubbo already has the next one ready to replace it, and the completed map will go into the chest under the table, labeled with its range of coordinates. Alongside almost a hundred others. Their primary map is a patchwork, covering the entirety of the far wall and now beginning to inch down onto the floor. It covers the entirety of the known SMP. It’s not enough.

Ranboo continues, half a whisper: “I only said we should light the portal ‘cause I wanted Ponk to have another look at him,” Ranboo nods to the crib.

“He stopped coughing,” Tubbo says, worry seeping in.

“Yeah, but I... I don’t know. It would make me feel better. He still doesn’t have his appetite back. I don’t think he’s eating enough and I don’t... I don’t even know if he’s eating *right*, or...” Ranboo trails off wearily.

They had both been especially cautious as new parents. *They* don’t know what a zombie piglin might need, and neither had the piglins who had avoided the dead child like the plague. No one had protested the strangers with gold taking him, and Tubbo has a soft spot for dead things nowadays.

Tubbo gives Ranboo’s hand a gentle squeeze. “Okay. What about tomorrow? We finish off this map, and then we head closer to one of the Nether outposts so it’s easier for Ponk and Sam to get to us, yeah?”

Ranboo nods, uneasy but understanding. “Okay. I don’t know for sure if we can finish today. We’re running out of blaze powder, which is another thing I was gonna ask Ponk to bring.”

“Well, what’s left?”

“We ran out of redstone, so, all that’s left is 36 of the 3 minute water breathing, and 28 3 minute night vision,” Ranboo says gloomily, glancing at Tubbo and expecting his frustration.

Tubbo sighs. “I mean, the night vision is more important. We’ve got enough turtle shells, it’ll be slower going, but that’s... that’s *fine*. So, use what’s left of the blaze powder on night vision. Are we okay on golden carrots?”

“We should be. Well, unless Michael eats the rest of them,” Ranboo can’t resist a smile.

“If it fixes his appetite, I don’t think I care,” Tubbo smiles too. Responsibility returns.

“Ranboo, if he stops getting better, it might mean the two of you need to go home.”

“Tubbo,” Ranboo says warningly.

“You’d be closer to Ponk, who can check up on Michael, a-and you’d be on stable, *dry* ground, and—”

Ranboo cups Tubbo’s cheeks, making him look up at him, only at his soft little smile, not his eyes even as they look at him with such fondness. “Tubbo. I will say this until it gets through your head,” he leans in close, forehead touching Tubbo’s, as an old promise returns.

“We *are* home. And we’re not going anywhere until Michael meets his Uncle Tommy.”

“And Wilbur,” Tubbo points out wryly.

“And his not-Uncle Wilbur,” Ranboo teases.

Tubbo stands on his tiptoes, pressing a kiss to Ranboo’s cheek, his hand covering Ranboo’s, feeling their ring bumping against his own. Because Michael tries to chew on gold, their rings are iron. Rings of iron are not a violent thing between the two of them. They don’t know. There are a lot of things over the past ten months that they don’t know.

Tubbo’s comm buzzes. So does Ranboo’s. His first guess is Quackity offering an update on New L’Manberg, or maybe Sapnap on something in the Nether, but it’s commonly expected that all messages are sent as whispers so as to avoid Dream seeing them. He’s not sure what would be important enough to warrant a message to everyone, and maybe that makes Tubbo a little hopeful, even if it shouldn’t. He takes out his comm.

Dream was slain by <player>

Tommy takes some time. They both want to get the fuck out of here as soon as possible, but in order to do that, they need to get Dream to do what they want. Neither of them feel prepared to deal with arguing with Dream alone, and both of them think the other should rest, so they do.

“Still hurts?” Tommy asks, hovering over Wilbur who had winced sharply just from sitting back against the wall in the farm. They’d deigned to settle in the farm. Despite the open grave, it was the most bearable room in the base if only for the smell of plants.

Wilbur takes a deep breath, one hand over his ribs. “Y-Yeah... a bit. Do you think broken bones can carry over?”

Tommy shrugs. “Dunno. What feels broken?”

“My ribs. Hurts to breathe,” Wilbur sighs shakily.

Tommy considers this carefully. “Gimme a sec to check something, alright?” He waits long enough for Wilbur to nod before he’s back out into the corridor. Dream’s corpse remains waterlogged and alone in the dome. Tommy had also tossed his stupid fucking journal in some chest there, not yet ready to destroy it. Maybe if he gets truly desperate, he’ll look inside for coordinates. Tommy doesn’t go to the dome; instead he returns to the poison room. It’s rare that they get lucky, he’d only found those two bottles of poison in that chest, but it wasn’t the only chest in the room. Dream might have left a health potion here. Maybe. Tommy sighs, weary, as the search comes up empty. There’s only one surefire way to ease Wilbur’s pain, and it’s by getting out of here. Tommy returns to Wilbur, who looks up at him without much hope.

“I think we should bring him back. Get out of here. Get you *real* help,” Tommy says resolutely. “You won’t have to do much, I just... I don’t want to be alone with him.”

“Sure, Tommy,” Wilbur gets to his feet with a wince. “I’m good, really,” he waves him off when Tommy steps forward as if to catch him. “If it was *really* bad, I’d just have you kill me again,” he smiles halfheartedly.

Tommy does not look amused by this. “Right, before then, I need your help.”

“Yeah?”

“Can you help me get this off?” Tommy tugs on the chain still hanging from his waist. “You’re gonna have to be like, strong. And dexterous,” Tommy says with some clear doubt.

Wilbur inhales through his teeth, also doubtful.

“Never mind,” Tommy mutters. The bruising is annoying, but Dream won’t be able to grab him with his hands tied.

“Sorry, Tommy.”

“Nah, better than you putting a hole in my stomach,” Tommy waves him off. Tommy has another book clutched in his hands. He *knows* he’s the one in control now, but he’s scared.

“Hey,” Wilbur knows. He usually does. “I’ll be with you. I mean, think about how hard it was for *us* to try to get him down when he was fully kitted out. Now *we’re* the ones with the weapons. *And* there’s two of us.”

Tommy manages half a smile. “Thanks, Wil.”

It was one thing to just tear into him until he stopped breathing, it was far more freeing for instance, but now Tommy has to *ask* something of Dream. That’s never gone over well.

Dream's body looks especially pathetic, half submerged in water, it made his flesh bloat faster. Tommy doesn't know where the urge came from, but he says it, the same commandment Dream held over him. He doesn't know why it feels important.

"*Wake up.*"

Dream shudders awake, the rope damp and therefore tighter, digging in painfully to his wrists even as they are finally no longer swollen. It's a vile sight, watching his body recede back into itself. Tommy knows it's far from comfortable. Dream seems confused as to why he is not immediately being butchered. He looks from Tommy to Wilbur warily.

"Now what're you gonna do, huh? What's the *plan*, boys?" Dream says mockingly.

Tommy snaps, beautifully, perfectly, he hits Dream across the face with the blunt of his own axe so the man is thrown back to the ground. "I didn't say you could talk, Dream," Tommy says with a giddy reverence.

Dream spits blood, unsteady, but far from dissuaded. "I don't get permission from *you*, remember? You get permission from *me*."

Tommy raises the axe, heart racing as blinding white fury rises on a whim. Dream stares up at him, waiting and satisfied. So Tommy stops.

"You want me to... to kill you. More I keep burning books, less time we have with you, yeah?" Tommy says carefully.

"That's a... a *cute* theory," Dream says dryly.

"No, that's it. Right, then," Tommy puts away the axe, sitting down across from Dream.

"Wil, can you... can you get some rope from the chest, make like, a length of it, and tie Dream to... to the Enderchest, I guess? Basically, make it so his wrists are tied down but he can still move 'em, y'know?"

"Got it, Tommy," Wilbur is happy to manhandle Dream to the floor as Dream had done to him many times. He takes particular satisfaction in pressing his face underneath the water as he ties a second rope around his wrists, ensuring he'll be secured once more before they cut the old rope free. Dream starts *really* struggling, desperately trying to get up for air, around the time Wilbur finally cuts him loose. Well, *looser*. Wilbur is quick to get away then, scrambling back with maybe too much fear as Dream bolts upright, able to move his hands somewhat.

"What the fuck are you two trying to accomplish?!" Dream shakes his head like a dog, saltwater spattering everywhere. He takes a few more gasping breaths before continuing to complain. "You've got nothing to *gain* anymore! You have me, fine, but what's the fucking *point*?" He snarls.

"I dunno, Dream," Tommy says coolly. "According to you, if we kill you enough times, we'll be *gods*," he says mockingly. "Nah," Tommy continues before Dream can make a retort, sitting down across from him, but well out of reach.

“You’re gonna give us the potion in your Enderchest.”

“Am I?” Dream says dryly.

“Yes, you *are*,” Tommy snaps. “Or we’re gonna fuckin’ gut you like a fish. So, get a move on.” He nods to the Enderchest and gets out his axe.

Dream is clearly calculating something, glancing from Tommy to Wilbur. “So, you’re just fine with this, huh, Wilbur? No moral qualms from the man who used to fight with words?”

Tommy looks back to see Wilbur actually flinch.

“T-That’s rich coming from you considering what you’ve– What you’ve been doing to me for fucking days now!” He manages to snarl.

Dream shrugs. “Hey, take it up with Tommy. I told him his behavior would have consequences.”

“Shut up! Just shut up! You’re just a fucking sadist!” Wilbur shouts at him. He then realizes Tommy is offering him the axe. He freezes, staring at it. He shakes his head. Not because he doesn’t want to hurt this man, rather, something he doesn’t want to voice aloud. He’s scared to stand that close to Dream right now, not while Dream can still move. Behind them, they both hear the Enderchest open. They look back at Dream first with surprise, and then hope, and then horror.

“*Stop stop stop!*” Tommy lunges forward, going to pry the bottle out of Dream’s hands, but half the potion has now disappeared and Dream is biting down on the neck of the bottle so Tommy is trying to pry it from his jaws, but by the time the glass starts to crack and Tommy finally falls back, bottle in hand, it’s empty. Tommy stares at Dream, mouth hanging open. “W-What the fuck have you done?”

Dream is utterly vindictive. “I’d untie me now, boys,” he says smugly, blue particles drifting from his mouth as the water breathing does its work. “We have, oh, about three minutes for me to swim to the surface. Or else we’re *all* stuck down here.”

Tommy and Wilbur just stare at him.

“Why bother hesitating? There is literally *nothing you can do now*.” Dream laughs. “Either I leave right now or no one gets out and we all die down here.” The self righteous bastard seems to think he’s won, but Tommy and Wilbur aren’t moving. His expression sharply turns from victory to horror. “No. No, if I go up, I can get another potion, I can come back, *you* all still have a chance of getting out of here!” Dream yanks against the ropes around his wrist, managing to tug it free from where it was wrapped around the Enderchest. He is right below the ladder out into the water and lunges toward it, desperately trying to force his way past them, but Tommy and Wilbur each grab an arm and haul him back. Dream doesn’t understand pain, not the way they do. Tommy is wearing the chestplate, so when Dream tries to hit him, he’s instead rewarded with bloody knuckles. “*No! No, you fucking idiots! Do you realize what you’re doing?! I have to leave right fucking now!*” Dream struggles, kicking furiously as the two brothers throw him to the ground on the other side of the dome.

Tommy and Wilbur exchange a weary look, Tommy shrugs, Wilbur just shakes his head, and whatever silent conversation they're having Dream is not privy to.

"We're running out of time!" Dream says frantically, bolting back to his feet, trying to see if he can make it past them. "So whatever debate you two are having—"

"Debate?" Wilbur snorts. "What fucking debate?"

Dream is at a loss for words.

Now Wilbur steps closer to him, looking almost *pitying*. "Did you really think we'd care more about something as trivial as *surviving* than making sure you don't fucking win? Have you forgotten who we are?"

Tommy steps up beside him, arm around his brother's shoulder. "We're L'Manberg, bitch!" He crows.

Wilbur grins. "We would rather *die* than give in to you, and join your SMP."

"You're... you're both insane. I'm offering you a *chance*." Dream once more throws himself against them, but Tommy grabs onto the rope around his wrists and uses it to drag him back to the ground, Netherite boot stepping on the length of rope so he cannot get back up.

"No you're not!" Tommy says liltingly. "You come back, you have the power again. That's what it's *all* about, remember?" He says mockingly. "We... we don't get out," a brief moment of weariness, a glance shared with his brother almost like an apology, he returns to their tormentor turned victim. "And you don't get to hurt us anymore. You know, there might've been a time where I would've accepted that. Agreed to let you try and swim your evil little self back up to the surface, but you, Dream..." Tommy laughs.

Wilbur picks up where he left off. "You made an existence so unbearable, that *this* is preferable," he gestures dismissively to the dome. Wilbur steps back up beside Tommy, both of them looking down at Dream with both loathing and relief. Dream doesn't win. Not this time.

"And now we just wait for the clock to run out, ey?" Tommy smiles. A heavy sigh, looking up at the water, and the glow squids circling the cave above.

"You said three minutes, didn't you, Dream?"

"You... you wouldn't have found a way out even with the potion. It's a maze of tunnels, only I know how to get out, okay? So just stop withholding, and—"

"Dream!" Wilbur laughs. "There's... there's no *point*. Okay? You're... you're bargaining with dead men."

"Three minutes? We're probably almost there," Tommy says brightly, tearing his gaze from the glow squids. The brothers stare at Dream, waiting for the particles to stop.

And Dream stares back, drowning in the realization that he's just destroyed the last shred of power he had.

Ten months ago, Tubbo had built a boat. He'd built it with Sam and Puffy, with assistance from Eret, Foolish, and Phil. It was all he had to go on, *it's underwater, deep underwater*, but he wouldn't waste it. He will leave New L'Manberg in Quackity's hands. It took a month to make a vessel seaworthy for a long voyage, and Tubbo had been disappointed to find he couldn't sail it alone. Puffy had scolded him for planning on being so reckless, and offered her services as an experienced Captain. This Tubbo had grudgingly conceded to. He was less inclined to give in when he returned to his little cabin in the snow to find Ranboo *packing*.

"What're you doing?"

"Huh?" Ranboo glances over at him. "Oh, yeah. I mean, I didn't realize how much I'd basically moved in here either," he laughs. "But more of my stuff is here than in New L'Manberg, so. Don't worry, I'm not packing *for* you."

Tubbo reaches out to stop Ranboo from folding up another shirt. "What I don't understand is why you're packing at all."

Ranboo hesitates, as if puzzled. "I thought... I thought the ship was ready. Is it not?"

Tubbo's next words come out a little strained, but maybe easier than he might've liked. "You're not coming, Ranboo."

Ranboo stops, looking over at him, still confused instead of hurt. "What d'you mean?"

"Ranboo..." Tubbo can't help but sound a bit exasperated. "It's a *boat*. On the *ocean*. Why the hell do you think I'd let you come with me somewhere that will *literally* kill you?"

Ranboo is still wry and teasing, not yet taking him seriously. "Isn't that what the boat is for?"

Tubbo laughs, harsh and irritated. The tension stretched between them like a rubber band. "Boats *sink*, Ranboo! They tip, they get flooded, and a ton of other shit that still leaves you *burned*. The rest of us, shit hits the fan, we can get out fast. *You* cannot jump overboard without getting burned alive."

"Isn't that what armor is for?" Ranboo says dryly, colder now that he catches on that Tubbo isn't kidding or merely kicking up a fuss. He *genuinely* wants to stop him.

"Are you going to spend the rest of your fucking *life* in armor, Ranboo?!"

Ranboo takes a step closer. "Isn't that what we've already been doing? How is this any different from surviving Dream?"

"Dream is a monster, not an endless pool of acid!" Tubbo is unintimidated even as Ranboo towers over him. "It's not... it's not *just* the water, Ranboo. What I'm doing, it's no way to

have a life. Puffy is only coming because I don't know how to sail yet, and once I figure out how, she can leave too. And Phil is only coming because of Wilbur. We're going to be trapped out there, looking for them, maybe forever. Is that *really* how you want to live?" A sharp accusation.

Ranboo looks down at him, and Tubbo almost steps back. Ranboo is looking him in the eye, gaze soft and almost sad. "If it's with you?"

"Ranboo..." Tubbo doesn't know how to keep protesting with those eyes, one red, one green, looking down at him so kindly.

"Yes," Ranboo reaches out toward him, before stopping himself. He takes a deep breath. "You don't have to understand it, but if you're going, I'm going."

"Why?" Tubbo asks anyway.

Ranboo smiles. "I... I don't know if I can explain it."

"Try anyway." Tubbo doesn't know if he's more hopeful or scared. This feels like something they have been building toward for a long time, and Ranboo is only prolonging the inevitable, because somehow, Ranboo must still worry that Tubbo won't feel the same. After *everything*, Tubbo doesn't know how that could be an option.

"I... I want to be there to help you, that's all," Ranboo is avoidant. He dares to turn back to folding his shirts.

"No," Tubbo follows, grabbing into his hand to stop him from continuing. "You're not coming, Ranboo. Especially if you can't give me a good reason as to why. I'm not gonna let you kill yourself for some vague, wishy-washy type answer."

"So, there *is* a situation where you'd let me come with you?" Ranboo is once more defensive, but he doesn't pull away from Tubbo's hand on his.

"Maybe. Or I guess not. Thank you for proving my point. There's no reason you can give, Ranboo. This is my trip to take, not yours," Tubbo says firmly. He won't concede until he knows Ranboo won't follow him into trouble.

"It's just you, all alone is that it?" Ranboo gets sharper, wound deepening.

"No, I'll be with people who have a *reason* to follow. And I'm sorry that that doesn't include you, but it's safer that way. I... I *have* to do this, Ranboo. You don't." Tubbo stares at him challengingly, waiting for him to try and defend himself, prepared to keep pushing.

Ranboo replies, quiet and a little sad and too *kind*. He isn't looking him in the eye anymore. "I... I love you. Is that a good enough reason?"

Tubbo stares at him, expression no longer adamant and instead weary. He's not surprised, not exactly, it's more like his worst fears and deepest hopes have been confirmed in one go. "Did you really think by saying that I'd be more inclined to let you come?"

Ranboo says nothing. He feels like his heart is about to be broken.

“Right,” Tubbo laughs weakly. “Right, you loving me back means I want you to *live*, Ranboo. And that’s why... that’s why I *need* you to stay here.”

“Have you thought about what I need?” Ranboo says softly. He can’t even revel in the weight of *loving me back* implying love in return.

“What, to live, maybe?” Tubbo tries to remain cold. It doesn’t really work, not as easily as it used to.

“No,” Ranboo murmurs. “I need *you*.”

Oh. Tubbo feels a lump form in his throat. He could force himself to set aside an *I love you*. *Need* is a another matter entirely. “I don’t want you to die, Ranboo.” *Want* was the word that came to mind first. Tubbo doesn’t know what that means. Maybe that he needs Ranboo too.

Tubbo falls forward, resting his head against Ranboo’s chest, eyes closed as tears threaten to spill over. He doesn’t want to lose anyone else. He doesn’t know what to do or how to stop him, so instead he just speaks, soft and aching, “love you too.”

That truth held between them, the loving each other and the risk, made starting their new efforts both harder and easier. While in the present, the rescue efforts have been split into concise teams—Sapnap, Techno, and whoever else could be gathered searched the Nether roofs while the rest focused on the seas—in the beginning, Tubbo tried to be everywhere all at once, and if Tubbo was there, Ranboo followed.

“Besides, I will probably do better in the Nether than on the ocean.”

“You’re not exactly making me feel better for letting you come.”

“As if you could stop me.”

Once Sam, with some help from Bad and Callahan, figured out that a portal could be lit on the boat as long as they were anchored steadily in one chunk, it made travel much easier. Techno and Phil stuck together whenever Techno wasn’t on patrol in the Nether, but he was still their go-to when it came to traversing the wastes. They were in the ocean near a jungle, and Tubbo thought it was worth checking the Nether. He was hoping they’d get lucky, and maybe their portal will link up with the one Dream used, so they might get some clue when they get close. This portal just opens up on the edge of a Crimson Forest.

Techno went through first. He scanned the area without much hope. “Nothin’. D’you still wanna look around?” He looks down at the ex-president.

It’s still an adjustment for Tubbo, to get used to Techno talking to him like an equal, even allowing Tubbo to give him instruction. As long as Phil needs to be here, Techno will be here too and he’ll even be amicable, however unenthused he was by the idea.

“I... I dunno,” Tubbo stares around, still hoping against hope that somehow *something* will appear to them. As time would pass, he would eventually get more efficient, get colder, as

hope became harder to hold onto.

“I mean, I could always ask the locals if they’ve seen a creepy green guy runnin’ around,” Techno offers, nodding into the forest.

“Talk to the... to the locals?” Ranboo gives him a look, surprised.

“Er, yeah? You talk to your... Endermen buddies,” Techno says dryly.

“Oh!” Ranboo catches on, nodding. “Yeah! Yep, that makes sense.”

“Don’t, uh, don’t get lost while I’m gone,” Techno heads off into the trees, golden helmet sharply contrasting his Netherite armor.

Ranboo watches him go, turning back and startled to find Tubbo has disappeared. He spots him wandering through the trees in a different direction and is quick to follow.

“Where’re we going?”

Tubbo shrugs. “For a wander. Might as well. I don’t exactly have high hopes for this one.”

“Oh.” Ranboo can’t disagree. “Did *you* know Technoblade can like, talk to piglins?”

“Well, no, but I’m not any more surprised by that than by *you* talking to Endermen,” Tubbo shrugs.

“Huh.” Ranboo supposes this makes sense. “Ope!” Ranboo stops quickly, stepping back when a piglin with a crossbow crosses their path. The piglin spares them both a glance, but finding their golden boots and helmet respectively sufficient, they move on.

“Well, there’s your proof,” Tubbo nods ahead to where Techno speaks with three piglins, each assessing a golden ingot as they proceed with the conversation.

“I... I mean, I didn’t need *proof*, I guess I just... I dunno. It’s cool to have someone else who isn’t... from the overworld, exactly,” is how Ranboo frames it.

Tubbo looks over at him, surprised. Ranboo doesn’t talk about his past, largely because he doesn’t have any memories of a past, but Tubbo supposes knowing what he is might be enough to contribute to some longing. Tubbo understands what missing a history is like. He turned up in a box on the side of the road for fuck’s sake, he’s as disconnected from his past as he can be. He’s never let it trouble him. He never needed a history. He had all the family he needed. Until he didn’t.

Tubbo steps back sharply when a baby piglin scurries up to him. Not *quite* a baby piglin, rather, a zombie piglin from the exposed bone and flecks of rot, one eye glassy and clouded, but the other is black and attentive. He stares up at him for a moment, before running back toward the group of piglins, but they pay him no mind, a few quickly moving away from him to continue their conversation, but the little zombie piglin moves right along to the next group of piglins, who treat him just the same. He eventually seems to give up on the piglins and chases after a chicken instead, with far greater success.

“So, they haven’t seen anything out here. Like, we’re the first Overworlders anybody here has even met,” Techno says dully.

“Thanks for trying,” Ranboo says. “What’s up with that?” He nods in the direction of the toddler, alone to the side of the group. There are a few other un-zombified baby piglins in the group, but they seem set on ignoring him as well.

“What?”

“Why’s... Why’re they being like that? I didn’t think piglins had a problem with zombie piglins,” Ranboo asks.

“They don’t. They’ll leave him alone,” Techno shrugs.

“That’s sorta the problem though, right?” Ranboo murmurs.

Techno glances at Ranboo, sighing as if irritated, but he still makes an effort to ease Ranboo’s concerns. He offers another ingot of gold to the nearest piglin and must say *something*, but the sounds are so harsh Ranboo can’t even distinguish what might be distinct words, then again, maybe piglin language isn’t structured around words at all.

“They’re not gonna hurt him or anything. He’s just... he’s already dead, y’know?” Techno shrugs, at least a bit apologetic. “The zombie piglins, they’re sick, sort of. Actually, that’s probably not the right translation.” Techno mulls it over. “They’re... they’re not really alive anymore, so, it’s a lost cause. I mean, it’s not like zombie piglins grow up. They’re *dead*. So, they’ll just... leave him here when they move on to their next camp.”

“Oh,” Ranboo says softly.

Tubbo knows he hasn’t been doing well mentally for a long time, but his current impulse is as close to madness as he’s gotten in a while. “Lost cause?” He scoffs. “What, just ‘cause he looks a little... a little different?”

Techno looks mildly uncomfortable, glancing from the rotting child to the former president, deigning not to make a sarcastic comment.

“Can you ask... can you ask if they’d care? If we took him?” Ranboo jumps to the next step, he and Tubbo on the same deranged wavelength.

Techno looks at them doubtfully. “They won’t.”

“Ask anyway.”

Techno sighs, fishing out another gold ingot. Another exchange, and Techno tells them what he already knew. “They don’t care. They’d leave him here anyway. But... you guys aren’t really thinking of bringing a baby zombie piglin back on the boat with us, are you?”

“Well, we’re certainly not leaving him behind,” Tubbo is all business now, even as there’s a tremor in his voice. “Ranboo, get the lad’s chicken, will you?” Tubbo steps up to the toddler and hesitates, that one good eye staring up at him. Tubbo leans toward him, still unsure of

what he plans to do, but when the zombie piglin responds by reaching up to wrap his arms around Tubbo's neck, sensing what Tubbo had intended to do, Tubbo picks him up easily. He's still a child, dead or not. He still expects someone to hold him.

Ranboo obliges, picking up the bird who is far fussier than the child.

Techno watches them, bemused but maybe a little approving. "Didn't see you two as father figures."

"I didn't think it was in the cards either, but we're not... we're not leaving him here," Tubbo says resolutely. His voice is almost steady, but his eyes are watering fiercely. Tubbo knows he's inviting trouble, bringing a baby on board a vessel that is actively looking for a fight. This is one more thing to destroy him, as if Ranboo wasn't enough as is. As if *Tommy* wasn't enough. But that's the whole point, isn't it? Tubbo knows what it is to love something dead. "We're not leaving him."

Ranboo looks at Tubbo, even as Tubbo remains focused ahead, but Techno sees it. Techno isn't the most adept at feelings, but he's not totally oblivious. He glances from Ranboo's gaze back to Tubbo, and realizes the kid has definitely fallen hard. For *government* no less. What a pity. Techno had had brief hopes they'd make an anarchist of him yet.

The months both dragged on and slipped by once Michael joined the crew. The watches were long, and the searches unfruitful, but there were also good days. Michael is curious and quick on his feet. He loves his chicken and his little wooden sword and he's startled by thunderstorms. And he is very much dead. He's also *perfect*.

He *also* doesn't know how to swim.

It's as close as Ranboo has ever gotten to killing himself.

Michael was not the one to decide to run overboard, instead, it was that goddamn chicken. It just happened that at that time, Michael was on its back. Ranboo had been watching him, and in a second, the chicken veers right instead of left, and there are only a few ropes tied across the railing. Just above the height for a toddler to disappear under them. the moment he went over the edge, Ranboo was throwing himself in after him, that is, until Technoblade at the last second grabbed onto him by the back of his suit and hauled him back on board.

"*Michael!*" All the while, Ranboo fought him viciously. "*Michael!*"

"Ranboo! Ranboo, calm down!" Techno shouted at him. "He can't drown, Ranboo!"

"*Let me go! Let me—*" Ranboo only stops once Techno shakes him.

"*He cannot drown, d'you hear me, Ranboo?!*" Techno is staring him down, looking him in the eye, if only to snap the kid out of it. "He literally *can't* drown. He's *fine*."

"W-What?" Ranboo stares at him, before sharply looking away, uneasy in more ways than one, but at least cognizant. "S-Someone needs to... needs to go get him."

“I will get him, Ranboo. I promise you, but you gotta stay here, alright?” Techno doesn't let go of his arms.

“Okay, just— Please,” Ranboo nods sharply.

Techno lets go. He sighs. “Alright, you got it. I'll get the little guy back safe and sound. No promises for that chicken, though.”

When soon after, Techno heaves himself over the side of the ship, toddler in his arms, the chicken too, held indignantly in his hand, Ranboo runs over to grab him.

“Hold *on*, helicopter parent! He's all wet! Wait until we dry him off. Get his *other* dad over here!” Techno says with exasperated concern.

“What the hell happened?!” Tubbo, as if summoned, immediately surmises what happened, Phil and Puffy close behind. “Did Michael— is he okay?!”

“Zombie piglins *can't* drown,” Techno says grumpily, passing the toddler along to the father *without* the deadly water allergy. “Ranboo apparently didn't know that either considering I caught him before he could take a dive overboard.”

“You *what*?!” Tubbo says, echoed by Phil and Puffy. Tubbo turns on Ranboo sharply. “Did you— Have you *actually* lost your fucking mind?!” Even in his horrified fury, he keeps a gentle hold on Michael, who seems utterly unperturbed, merely a bit damp.

“Michael went overboard! I just— I panicked! I didn't— I couldn't just— What was I supposed to do?!” Ranboo pleads desperately.

“Um, how about *not kill yourself*, hm?! How about that?!” Tubbo says fiercely. “Got enough of that sort of bullshit to last a lifetime!”

“It wasn't— It wasn't *on purpose*—” Ranboo stammers out, wide-eyed.

“But can you *still* not see how fucking dangerous it is for you out here?!” Tubbo pleads back.

“You think I don't know that?! I was going in after *him*,” Ranboo nods at Michael. “He's worth dying for *just* as much as Tommy is!”

Silence. Puffy, Phil, and Techno seem to each be contemplating jumping overboard. Instead, none of them move.

Tubbo isn't looking at him, merely letting Michael hold onto his fingers, playing with his hands. “You could help just as much from the Mainlands,” he tries quietly.

“Maybe, but I wouldn't be with *you*, and you know that's what I want.”

“And I want you somewhere safe. You and Michael both,” Tubbo replies stubbornly.

“There's nothing wrong with Michael growing up here.”

“Yes, until we run into Dream, or his father kills himself by being a right dumbass and taking a swim, how about that?”

“That’s *not* fair—”

“Christ, you lot sound like an old married couple. D’you know that?” Phil cuts the tension easily.

That gets the two teenagers to shut up. It usually does. Tubbo knows he should stop trying to convince him. He’s been trying to get Ranboo off this ship since before it was built. Phil, and the others, have found asides like that to be useful to get them to quit. It’s become quite the trend, them bickering like an old married couple. It’s rapidly starting to no longer feel like a joke. Tubbo lets it go that time, they move on, but Tubbo still worries.

The L’Manboat is a good vessel, sturdy and reliable, but Tubbo still doesn’t like his husband floating on top of a death trap. He does, admittedly, like the idea of it being his *husband* floating on top of a death trap. At this point, his efforts to get Ranboo away from the water is just another quiet, perhaps ridiculous, way of him saying *I love you*, and Ranboo never getting fed up with telling him he’s staying is just another way of saying *I love you too*.

It takes a few more months of them living like this, stressed and scared and grieving and undeniably happy, for it to stop being a joke altogether. Tubbo almost feels like he should be opposed to the idea. His best man isn’t there. But he also knows Tommy would rag on him for putting it off. So, Tubbo doesn’t *propose* exactly, more like he nags.

“We have to.”

“We *have* to?” Ranboo was far from opposed to the idea, the opposite, in fact, he just liked hearing Tubbo complain and wait for a ring.

“Otherwise, we’ve had Michael out of wedlock, and I refuse to let our son grow up a bastard. What will the other parents think? Think of the scandal, Ranboo.”

“He’s... he’s adopted?!”

Puffy, as Captain of the ship, is able to marry them. Tubbo insists they don’t make a big fuss. “We’ll have a proper wedding back in the Mainlands when Tommy can be my best man, alright?” That had shut down any push from Puffy who wanted to celebrate.

So, it’s a quiet thing. Their first rings are made of gold. They won’t find out for a few weeks what a problem that would be until Michael nearly swallows one.

Tommy is gone. Tubbo has a son, he gets married, and Tommy is still gone. But they’re still coming for him. And one day, one day soon Tubbo would like to think, Tommy is going to meet his nephew, and he’ll find out Ranboo is his brother in law, and then they’re going to be so happy.

Once Dream stops exhaling blue particles, Tommy hits him over the head with the axe. Dream doesn't even struggle. The silence that follows is heavy. "What... what now?" He can't stop himself from looking to Wilbur for instruction.

Wilbur is lost in thought for a moment, cogs clearly turning, and Tommy dares to get hopeful.

"What? What is it?" Tommy pushes.

"I... I dunno how we're gonna make him do it, but what about his comm? He could send our coordinates to Tubbo, couldn't he?" Wilbur says doubtfully.

"Yeah," Tommy is almost surprised he hadn't thought of it himself before jumping right to using the potion. "Holy shit, Wil. Yeah! We can... we can make him. It's not... it's not all done with yet! I'll... I'll *make* him do it," Tommy says with the kind of conviction that makes Wilbur bury a shiver. There's a *hint* of that old Tommy gleam, though; something that spells mischief. "I... I actually got an idea."

Tommy returns to the corridor with purpose, Wilbur following, puzzled when Tommy turns into the library. "I... I can't check it without a comm, I'm sorta going based on the feeling, but I should have like, a level or so to do this," Tommy lays the axe on the anvil. "It might take a minute, so bear with me," Tommy takes the chisel, the XP allowing him to carve into the handle of Netherite. Wilbur looks over his shoulder to try and read it, but the writing is scratchy and small.

"Why're you... why're you *naming* it?" Wilbur asks, puzzled.

"Because I trust Dream about as far as I can fuckin' *spit*. And I am the *greatest* man alive!" Tommy grins, giddy delight taking over as he cannot resist telling Wilbur. "I... I found a way for us to talk to Tubbo!"

"You..." Wilbur stares from Tommy to the axe, understanding dawning. "You're a fucking *genius*, man!" Wilbur laughs.

"Fucking right I am!" Tommy assesses the few written copies he has left. "I've... I've only got a couple more copies of the book." Tommy is anxious to get on with his plan, but in order to fulfill it, he'll need quite a few revive books. Tommy grabs a stack of blanks. "Can you help me?"

"How am I supposed to do that?" Wilbur asks.

"You copy it from one of the copies we've got, I write from memory," Tommy says slowly, like Wilbur is being dense on purpose.

"Oh." Wilbur had forgotten he could read the book. Although, once he gets a look at the strange script, he doesn't think *read* is the right word. "Are you... are *you* okay to make copies?"

"What?" Tommy has already settled down to work on his cell floor with easy habit, glancing at Wilbur like he is merely a distraction.

“Well, Dream basically made you do this until you *bled*. Does it not... Does it not freak you out to keep on writing them?” Wilbur asks, yet to start his own assigned book.

“Uh, no,” Tommy says dully. “It’s sorta... calming now, I guess.” He shrugs. “I guess that’s probably not *good*, but it’s sure is handy right now, eh?”

“Yeah, yeah I guess,” Wilbur ignores how that unsettles him and instead turns to the first page.

Tommy, somewhere in their work, making two copies for every one of Wilbur’s, has the odd feeling that it’s almost like they’re doing coloring pages together or something. Maybe like back when Niki was working on making the flag for L’Manberg, or when he and Tubbo would try some new craft—badly—together. Friendship bracelets and flower crowns and occasionally Tubbo trying to make some redstone thing Tommy doesn’t understand, but despite their circumstances, the feeling of quietly working side by side, Tommy had missed it. It feels... it feels *easy*. Not many things have felt easy for him, not for a long time.

Wilbur stops when his hand starts to hurt. Tommy hadn’t even noticed when the pain started. “Er, how many copies did you want, exactly?” Wilbur asks, holding his wrist.

“Hm?” Tommy glances up at him, still focused despite the ache in his own wrist.

“How many are we making?”

“Um,” Tommy is trying to focus on two things at once. He doesn’t *want* to stop writing, but that thought feels oddly like his dependency on the discs, so he takes a pause, frowning.

“Just... a lot. Maybe... maybe ten? For what I have planned, I think ten.”

“So, after that one, we’re good then,” Wilbur nods to the one Tommy is working on.

“No,” Tommy shakes his head, resisting the urge to keep writing. He can pause to have a fucking conversation. *He* is in control of his own impulses. “I wanna have at least one more so we can copy more down the line.”

“Do you... do you wanna take a break?”

Tommy shakes his head again. “No, but you can.”

Wilbur stares at Tommy, who hovers over the page, unsure if he should keep going or not. His frown deepens when Wilbur reaches out and covers his writing hand with his own.

“D’you think we can do it with... with eight books? That way, we have one spare for me to copy from, and you don’t have to finish that one,” Wilbur says gently.

Tommy feels torn in half. He feels like he *needs* to keep going, but that need scares him, so he doesn’t *want* to continue.

“Tommy,” Wilbur says more firmly now. “Can I... Can I have the quill, please?”

Tommy's iron grip on the feather goes slack, and he allows Wilbur to slip it out of his hand. It's like Tommy has been given permission to feel the pain of it, and suddenly it's like his hand hurts worse, a throbbing pain below his thumb. "Ow..." He mutters bitterly. Despite the struggle, it does feel like progress somehow. He'd let Wilbur stop him. He doesn't feel panicked by the book at his feet remaining unfinished. Well, not *too* panicked, at least. "Come on, then. I wanna... I wanna get this going. So I don't think about..." he glances at the unfinished book warily, like it might bite him.

"Yeah," Wilbur nods. "You... you got the axe, don't you?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I got it," Tommy gets to his feet, collecting the books. "Let's get this going then, why don't we?" He tries to get some energy back, to not get dragged into the pull of rewriting those books.

They return to the dome, where Dream's body has remained, and Tommy drags him back to life with that same commandment, "*wake up.*"

Dream gasps awake, far less accustomed to resurrection than the two of them. He stares at Wilbur and Tommy and it *almost* looks as if he feels betrayed. "Now what? No one is getting out of here, that much is obvious, so what the hell could you *possibly* want from me?"

"You're gonna get out your comm, and you're gonna send our coords to Tubbo! Easy-peasy, right, you dumb green bitch?"

"And why would I do that?" Dream sneers.

"Because we're gonna hurt you, Dream," Tommy is almost cheerful now, it's a facade, one covering exhaustion, but he can't pretend there isn't a hint of satisfaction of knowing he will be able to not only do harm to Dream but to do so with a *purpose*. "Until you break down and do it. And remember, we've got *all* the time in the world, don't we?"

Dream scoffs, "I haven't *broken down* so far, have I? You managed to keep it together no matter what I did to you, and I *know* I'm not weaker than you are."

"Nah, you're not, but you, oddly enough, have still got something left to lose, Dream! You took *everything* from us, and pain became normal, and then nothing else *mattered* except resisting you," Wilbur joins in, and Tommy feels a burst of pride that his brother is no longer too afraid to taunt Dream alongside him.

"What do I have left to lose?" Dream says it like he's still trying to challenge them, but Tommy knows what fear looks like, even on this monster's face.

"Limbs, mostly," Tommy says mildly. "But we'll just start simple, eh? I'm going to kill you, and then I'll revive you, and then I'll kill you again! And so on."

"Haven't you already done that?" Dream says dryly.

"Yeah! I have! Don't tell me you thought it was a *pleasant* experience, Dream," Tommy says mockingly. "How's Limbo treating you, actually? Do you feel like spending a decade

there until you're feeling more chatty?"

Dream gets some of his arrogance back. "Last I checked, you didn't *want* to hear about my Limbo, Tommy."

Tommy's grin, however forced it was to begin with, drops away. He brings the axe down on Dream's torso. His death will be slow enough. That still isn't the most effective or most helpful means of dying, meaning, the most painful, but Tommy knows especially well how to make a slow death worse. So Tommy steps on the wound. Tommy knows it's doing the trick not because Dream screams *more* fiercely, but rather he stops screaming altogether, instead, breathless and wide-eyed. Tommy knows it won't be enough to make him die faster, though. Just make it sharper.

"You should feel lucky we don't have any fucking blazerods down here," Tommy hisses. "I'd put a dozen through your ribs, and even then we wouldn't be even."

Dream cannot speak. Wilbur *can*, but even he doesn't dare voice it aloud, *getting even? Is that what this is for?*

Eventually, Dream stops moving. Tommy eases up.

"Right," his shoulders relax, tension having built up as he watched the man die. "Gotta... gotta rename it, yeah?" He weighs the bloody axe in his hands, almost stumbling over the corpse as he returns to the library. Wilbur follows. He doesn't like being alone with Dream, dead or alive.

Tommy doesn't talk about it. His anger, Dream's reluctance, any of it. He focuses only on carving into the handle of the axe. So Wilbur doesn't say anything about it either, he just waits. Tommy finishes, clearly tired from the meticulous work, but again, he doesn't waver.

"Tommy, you *can* take a pause," Wilbur says.

"I'll pause when Tubbo is on his way," Tommy says coolly, fishing out a revive book. "*Wake up.*"

Dream returns with another gasp, hands going to his chest and the hole that had been there moments before.

"So, messaging coordinates. Thoughts?" Tommy says brightly.

Dream glances at him, weary in a different way, but his tone remains steady, almost *bored*. "You don't deserve it."

Tommy almost flinches. "*Deserve?* You don't... you don't know fucking *anything* about deserve," he says, radiating fury.

"Well, clearly I do. I've been deciding what you deserve for... over a year now, huh?" Dream says calmly. He sits up. "What next? Are you gonna beat me senseless? Break every bone in my body? Or is the torture me having to *sit here* while you get yourself all riled up and pissed off?"

Tommy knows Dream is trying to make him angry, but that doesn't make it any easier to not fall for it. Tommy takes a deep breath. "You're being mean and acting like everything is fine for you because you don't got any other bit of control left."

"What, you're psychoanalyzing now? That seems a bit above your capabilities, Tommy," Dream says mockingly.

"Thank you for proving my point," Tommy replies, keeping his tone calm and unbothered with some effort. Tommy raises the axe, and brings down the blunt side against Dream's shoulder. The man's collarbone shatters.

All of the bravado and arrogance in the world, and Dream will still scream at a broken bone. Tommy raises the axe, and brings down the blunt side again. A rib cracks. Again. His arm breaks. Again. His jaw is dislocated. Again. Another rib broken. Again. Some organ must take some damage. Tommy pauses, breathless and weak. Dream is shattered. No longer crying out, instead his breathing is shallow and wheezing from his broken ribs.

"I think if he succumbs to his injuries, it still counts as being from this puppy, eh?" Tommy pats the axe fondly.

"Y-Yeah, probably," Wilbur says, more distracted by watching Dream still fighting to breathe with morbid fascination. He hates the thought rising that he and Tommy know what that feels like, fighting to draw breath on instinct even when they knew death was easier. Wilbur doesn't want anything in common with Dream, but somehow by some nasty twist of fate, it seems Tommy is committed to ensuring they share some experiences. It feels wrong. *Tommy* should be the one telling Wilbur to hold back, to show mercy, not the other way around. Not that Wilbur is doing any such thing. Dream doesn't *deserve* mercy.

Tommy sits back on top of a chest, resting the axe across his lap, and watching, waiting for Dream to stop struggling to breathe.

So it follows.

Four more deaths, each of them slow and brutal and without results, and Tommy pauses before going to carve into the axe anew.

"Do *you* got anything you want to say to them?"

"What?" Wilbur is startled. He feels like Tommy has barely spoken to him in the past hours, instead just this strange, vicious focus between him and Dream.

"To... to the server, y'know? I've been writing them to Tubbo, but it goes to everyone," Tommy nods to the axe.

"Um," Wilbur almost doesn't know what to do with the thought. He'd made his peace with never being able to speak to any of them again, and however convoluted, here is a way he can try and make amends in some tiny way. "Can you... can you tell them I'm sorry I left things sorta rough? I'd... I'd change it if I could," Wilbur doesn't know why he feels almost embarrassed to be voicing this aloud to Tommy, especially when he's asking him to instead

project it to the rest of the server. “And... that’s for Phil and Tubbo, really, but I guess it works for any of... any of them.”

Tommy nods. “Might need to be two axe swings for that one. Can only write a little at a time,” and he settles down to work. He can multitask. “Left things sorta rough how?”

“Oh, well,” Wilbur winces. “I... I shouted at them both. Argued with Tubbo, shut Phil down, and stormed off. Never to be seen again...”

“Ah. Yeah, that’s a bit rough.”

A pause while Tommy works, then: “What if... what if we actually can’t make him? Like, so far he’s held out, so, what if... what if he never tells us?” Wilbur says.

“Shit, man, way to be optimistic,” Tommy gives him a look. “Why’re you sayin’ *what if*? If we can’t convince him, we *know* what happens. We stay down here forever.”

“I was trying to be pragmatic, actually. I meant more... if killing him over and over doesn’t work, maybe we should leave him dead for a long time? We both know how bad Limbo can fuck you up,” Wilbur offers.

Tommy mulls this over. “I got my own ideas.”

“Such as?”

Tommy shrugs, assessing his work on the axe. “Permanence.”

Wilbur frowns, but Tommy has left before he can question his meaning. Their ideas for how to best break Dream are based so strongly on what broke *them*. Neither of them know if there’s a possible torment actually suited to Dream that will be more effective. If they did figure it out, what would break him apart, who’s to say that would actually make him talk? Dream is erratic and dangerous while *sane*, Tommy almost dreads to think of what his behavior might become after the sort of damage Tommy himself had endured for so long now. Tommy knows he was good once. He doesn’t know if that’s true anymore. Tommy almost wonders what label lies once someone sinks past evil.

Tommy feels some semblance of pride that he is patient enough to try a few more times before jumping to something more brutal, something a former version of himself could not have stomached. He carves Wilbur’s last message into the side of a knife. He only has a couple more books left before they’ll have to make new copies, so he needs to make these deaths count. Wilbur has yet to partake directly in the violence, but he’s been happy to help. Thus, Tommy is surprised when, after they have tied Dream’s wrists once more—a knife means getting closer, which definitely warrants more security—that Wilbur extends a hand, as if asking for the knife.

“Wil?” Tommy doesn’t know what he’s asking for, even as it’s obvious.

“He... he can’t move. So, he can’t reach me. I... I wanna have a turn,” Wilbur says it grimly, but nonetheless, he’s volunteered. It’s strange, Tommy had acted first, so all of his

violence can rest easily underneath the guise of *necessary*. Wilbur, however, is admitting to something that they both feel, they both even agree with, but they have yet to say outright, it is the *desire* for violence. Wilbur's reluctance, Tommy now realizes, had been purely out of fear of being within reach, that Tommy understands all too well.

Tommy nods. "Do you want me to stay?" Tommy wasn't planning on leaving, but he'd understand too if Wilbur didn't want him to see as he fell just a step further, at the same time, he also knows how unnerving it is to be left alone with that man, even tied down.

"Maybe?" Wilbur seems unsure, staring at Dream's unmoving body, like he doesn't know what to make of it.

Tommy isn't quite sure what to do with that, mulling it over in his head. Wilbur had given him privacy when he'd fallen apart, but he'd come running the moment he shouted. "I'll... I'll go. And if you need me, you just have to shout," Tommy offers him the revive book as well as the Netherite boots.

Wilbur nods, but he doesn't look at him, fixated on the corpse even as he accepts the book. In some strange way, this feels *right* to Wilbur, almost as if this is how it should have been all along. The Tommy he once knew would never relish in violence, not the way he has, and he, Wilbur, would not sit back like a terrified wet blanket while Tommy crumbled. *He* should've been the one to swing first, *he* should've protected his brother. He's been failing at that a lot longer than he's been succeeding.

Wilbur refocuses on the book now in his hands. The boots are self explanatory, not protection, but a method of crushing ribs. The book warrants more instruction. "How do I..?"

"You burn it, and you want him to come back," Tommy says simply.

Wilbur scoffs. "How do I *want* him back?"

"Same way you use that knife, Wil," Tommy says, still too calm, too solemn.

"Right," Wilbur says weakly. Wilbur has never had a problem hurting Dream in the past, *hurting* him isn't the problem. It's getting close to him after the past weeks of torment. So much time where the only stimulation he had was this man beating him or cutting him open and so much time left hanging there, consumed only by pain, waiting and dreading the moment Dream would come back for him, all the while not knowing what state Tommy was in. That was one small comfort he had in hindsight, knowing Tommy wasn't being hurt in that way. It almost makes it feel like his suffering served something. Wilbur glances up, startled to find Tommy has left him, even as it's what he said he would do. That's fine. Better, in fact, because he thinks Tommy knew Wilbur would feel ashamed of his brutality with Tommy present. Without him, Wilbur thinks he might be able to revel freely in the bloodshed.

Wilbur, without the same precedent or weight, still says those words as he takes a match to the edge of the paper, "*wake up.*"

Wilbur feels a strange rush of power, like he's just licked a battery, and then death bends to his will. Dream sits up sharply before falling back, unable to support himself, hands bound behind his back. He squints in puzzled suspicion at Wilbur, who stands over him alone, knife in hand.

"What, Tommy give up?" Dream scoffs.

Wilbur says nothing. He could make a sharp comment, a witty retort, but right now he's just thinking.

Dream glares at him, uneasy. "What? Silent treatment? Are you trying to... psych me out or some bullshit like that?"

Wilbur shakes his head. Truly, he's just lost in thought, debating what he'll have to do to make Dream finally snap. Not even to use his comm, although that would be ideal. Really, right now Wilbur just wants Dream to beg for mercy. He hasn't done that yet.

Dream is still trying to puzzle out Wilbur's game, and instead of paranoia, he smiles. "Oh, don't tell me it's still working. What, you're scared to talk in front of me? Is that it? You still wondering if I'm gonna sew your mouth shut again?" He says mockingly.

"No," Wilbur says sharply. "No, I won't lie and say I'm not still scared of you, but I will say that no longer matters." Wilbur crouches down beside him, limbs still sore from the abuse of the past weeks, but he ignores it, more focused on assessing Dream like an animal to be butchered. Dream's clothes are tattered and bloody. Wilbur is annoyed to find that despite the blood, and the scars he knows must exist underneath, Dream still has body fat. He still has muscle and health. That's not fair. He bleeds like they do, but he still doesn't understand what it means to truly lose yourself to decay. And sadly, that's not something he can carve out of Dream with a knife.

Dream is tense, well aware that Wilbur certainly isn't assessing him with sympathy. "Are you waiting for Tommy or some bullshit?" He tries to get a reaction, better than the waiting game.

"No," Wilbur says mildly. "Tommy won't be here for this."

Dream doesn't even have a snide remark to make. "*Why?*"

Wilbur laughs. "You sound freaked out, Dream."

"I'm just used to you two being tied at the hip," Dream tries for arrogance again. Wilbur finds it cheap.

"Well, usually tied at the *wrist* when you're involved," Wilbur says brightly. He still hasn't done anything to Dream yet. He just holds the knife and stares. Finally, he stands, and is delighted to find Dream flinches when he moves suddenly. "I'll start small, how about that?" Wilbur nails Dream in the ribs, Netherite boots cracking bone easily. Dream gasps for breath, curling inward.

Wilbur considers how it felt, to hear the crunch of Dream's ribs, maybe even feel it through the armor. It somehow feels too impersonal. So Wilbur grabs Dream by the collar of his shirt, tugging him back so he can't curl in a ball and instead letting his knee dig into Dream's chest. Dream chokes on a scream as Wilbur's body weight aids in an already broken bone.

Wilbur twirls the knife through his fingertips, just barely catching it before it can drop from his missing finger. "It's funny, I think. You had very little debate taking your pound of flesh out of me, and now, I just can't seem to decide where to begin!" He laughs again, unnervingly giddy. He finally, methodically, drags the knife across Dream's face, holding him still with his other hand, tracing a broad smile across his cheeks. "I'll start small," he says again, softer, irreverent, as he proceeds to cut open Dream's mouth, a grisly reversal of Dream's own punishing of him. Dream writhes underneath him, struggling to scream as he coughs up the blood now pouring into his mouth. "I'll start small..." he murmurs as he moves down. He cannot starve Dream with a knife, but he can cut away some of that body fat he so envies. So he does.

Tommy stays out of it. He hears Dream screaming, but he doesn't hear Wilbur screaming for him, so he minds his own business. That business is, perhaps unhealthily, finishing the book Wilbur had made him stop writing. Well, not *made*, just heavily encouraged. Tommy had been itching to finish it ever since. He knows he's ill, in more ways than one, but this particular illness, that *need* to finish a book, it sure is fucking annoying.

He's finished this one. And, okay, maybe he filled out another, but he couldn't resist.

And he's heard nothing from Wilbur so far. It's making him nervous.

If by some godless chance Dream had overpowered him, there's no reason for him not to storm in and grab Tommy too, so that can't be it. He doesn't want to interrupt. He feels like he's not supposed to, like going in there now interrupts something sacred. When he had killed Dream over and over and Wilbur had left him to it, he'd only interjected when Tommy had screamed, snapped out of his bloody reverie by Dream offering something horrible that Tommy still fears might be true. *We cannot have the same Limbo. It doesn't make sense. Or if it does, it doesn't mean anything.*

Wilbur has not screamed, so Tommy can only assume he still exists in that bloody reverie, but Wilbur had only had one book. What could he possibly be doing that hasn't killed Dream yet?

Morbid curiosity gets the better of him. Tommy approaches the dome.

Tommy is good at brutality. He learned from the best. But in one regard, Wilbur is better at pain than he is. Wilbur is *patient*. He can be slow and methodical, almost scientific in his torment. That is why Dream lived so long, despite the gore now strewn about the dome. Tommy is numb to such blood and vile, but as he stares at the clear, distinct parts, the layers cut away, he can't help but try to remember if Wilbur had ever prepared game they caught. He cannot remember Wilbur ever skinning an animal, but it's clear he's had some practice.

Finally, his gaze turns to Wilbur, covered in blood. Not spattered with it as Tommy had been from swinging the axe, rather he's up to his elbows in gore, as if his arms had been

submerged in it.

“He... he dead yet?” Tommy asks, despite it being quite obvious that he is.

Wilbur jumps, and when he turns back to Tommy, some nagging fear in the back of his mind thinks of Schlatt’s funeral, thinks of Quackity, and thinks that Wilbur will turn to face him with blood on his mouth.

No. He’s a mess, eyes a bit glassy, but no blood has touched his lips.

“Yeah. Yeah, he’s dead,” Wilbur says, sounding almost distant.

Tommy resists the urge to ask how long he’s been dead, to ask what Wilbur had been doing since the man actually died, to ask what the *point* of it was. He has no room to judge, there’s not even disgust, really, mostly curiosity at what drove Wilbur to do... what he did.

“I take it he didn’t send the message?”

“What?” Wilbur looks *puzzled*. Like he’s genuinely forgotten their goal here. “No, no he hasn’t,” it returns to him. He stands on unsteady legs.

“Well, I got some more books. And...” Tommy laughs. “I do have one more idea.”

“You do?” Wilbur says it with an implied doubt. Unspoken, but Tommy understands. *After all this, what can you do?*

“Yeah. Bear with me. You might have to hold him for me, can you do that?” Tommy has a book in one hand, an axe in the other.

“Yeah, sure,” Wilbur fumbles in his pocket, passing Tommy the matchbook, some blood exchanging hands as well when Tommy accepts it. Tommy doesn’t mind. He’ll be touched by more blood soon enough.

Another match and book gone.

It’s strange, watching Dream’s body restore itself when slivers of his flesh remain around the room. Dream’s resurrection this time is sluggish. Tommy remembers the pieces of himself that had rotted away all that time ago returning to him, and he’d imagine Dream is going through something similar. Dream slumps over on his side, coughing blood that had remained in his throat. His eyes look different now, and Tommy thinks maybe skinning an animal had been an especially apt descriptor, because Dream’s eyes look like prey. Dream looks between him and Wilbur like a rabbit in a headlight, frozen, heart beating too fast, waiting and helpless.

Tommy can’t think of a more beautiful sight, at least not this far underground.

Tommy feels his heart once more fluttering with a dangerous excitement. “We’re getting impatient, Dream. Down to the wire, even. You’re running out of chances. You won’t like it when we get desperate.”

“Oh, you’re not desperate already?” Dream snarls, defensive and furious. Tommy is almost impressed that he’s capable of speech.

“No, no you’ll see what *desperate* is quite soon, really. You wanna talk about power?”

Tommy puts a hand on Dream’s shoulder, that condescending power trip of being able to do what he wants with him, Tommy can’t help but relish in giving Dream one more shred of the torment he gave them. So he continues, voice eerily between excited and *kind*. “Dream, if you tell us the coords, I will owe you forever. D’you realize that? You keep this to yourself, nothing comes of it. It won’t matter anymore because it’ll be a lost cause. We’re almost to that point, alright? Once we give up, you’ll have nothing. But if you tell me, I will never be able to let that go.” Wilbur stares at Tommy, unsettled, if not impressed by his bargaining. Tommy knows *he* is the best bargaining chip with Dream they have. Wilbur hates it. Tommy doesn’t notice his expression change, his focus entirely on Dream as he continues. “Even if you end up in prison, which, we probably won’t even do that to you considering you’re down a leg, you’ll be able to spend the rest of your life knowing I owe you for this.”

Dream sharpens immediately. “*Down a leg?*”

“Yeah!” Tommy smiles. “If you don’t tell me right fucking now, this is the last straw. And I’m gonna chop your fucking leg off.”

Dream’s arrogance wavers, a flicker of fear, and it makes Tommy’s heart *sing* to know he caused that fear.

“See,” Tommy continues, now holding the axe, mimicking a few practice swings. “*We* don’t need you functional or mobile to drag you from one experiment to the next, nah. Every hurt we wanna give you, we can do just fine here. And, not like we’re gonna have you run through a jungle any time soon,” Tommy exchanges an amused glance with Wilbur, who is doing his best to roll with the punches. He still looks a little out of it.

“Okay, I have a finite amount of limbs, Tommy,” Dream says bitterly. “What happens when you take them all, and I *still* don’t send your message? Not sure if I’ve noticed, but you’ve *been* hurting me and I *still* haven’t done it.”

Tommy shrugs. “I dunno. Probably shouldn’t blind you, need you to see to type, but could... I dunno. Cut off your ears. Both of ‘em, so you’re not all matchy-matchy with Wil. Maybe... maybe I’ll start unwinding your fucking intestines. Maybe I’ll make you eat ‘em, gotta be a paradox in there for your science-y bullshit,” Tommy is full of vicious, icy rage, staring at Dream, nothing about him indicating an exaggeration. “Eventually we’ll get you to do what we want. You should know better by now. Even if it’s not about pain, it *is* about power. And I think when you’re a legless, earless, miserable fuckin’ stump, you might have to realize that *we* have all the power now.”

Dream looks pale. Ha. “I send a message to Tubbo, it just means I get screwed over *and* you two get away scot-free,” he manages to sound vindictive. He’s also bargaining again, just like Tommy is. “Why the fuck do you think I’ve held out this long?”

“Yeah, but you’d end up... I dunno, dead or in a cell,” Tommy shrugs. “If you hustle, you’ll be there with all your limbs. Isn’t that nice?”

“How am I supposed to believe you won’t just cut me up anyway?” Dream snaps.

Tommy leans forward, still smug, still a little mad with power. “Because we’re not *like you*, Dream. I won’t hurt you for the fun of it, even if I have every fucking right to. We’re gonna get out, and we’ll be fine, and hell, maybe even you’ll be fine. Better in prison than dismembered down here, eh?”

Dream seems to be calculating. “Except... except after all that, if I still don’t send the message, what then?” He smirks. “If we’re talking about *power*, how about that, huh? You can tear me to fucking *pieces*, but that doesn’t change the fact that *I’m* the one with the comm, and I am yet again your only fucking mercy,” he hisses. “Do it, Tommy. I fucking *dare* you.”

Tommy stands, his chest feels tight and he wishes it were only righteous anger, not the bitter, exhausted fear that Dream simply won’t let them win. Tommy has his axe.

“Wil, can you help me hold him?” Tommy says calmly.

“Yeah, yeah, sure,” Wilbur comes up behind Dream, who tries to yank free, to get away from his butcher, but there’s not much he can do when Wilbur grabs onto the rope and pulls it up so Dream’s arms are tugged on painfully. Wilbur cannot pretend to have a sense of caution, nor one of fear, but he still has to ask. He didn’t think his brother could go that far, but then again, the two of them have discovered a lot about themselves in the past days. “Tommy... Tommy what’re you gonna do?”

“He won’t fucking do it,” Dream scoffs. “Even I never took off a whole *limb*—”

Tommy brings the axe down on Dream’s leg, just below his knee. Dream screams, writhing in agony as blood spurts from his nearly severed leg, held on because the bone merely cracked under the blow instead of shattered. Wilbur doesn’t look, he focuses only on holding Dream down.

“Dream! Dream, shut up a sec,” Tommy crouches down to his eye level, even as the spray of blood spatters his face, reaching out, grabbing Dream by the jaw, forcing him to stop thrashing and look at him. “Your leg, it’s still *attached*. If I kill you now, you could get to keep it! All you gotta do, is type on that little screen of yours, something like *hi, Tubbo*. *Sorry I’m a sick fucking bastard, if you’d like to pick up your best friend, here’s the address!* That doesn’t sound too hard now, does it, Dream?”

Dream struggles to breathe through gritted teeth, eyes tightly shut, and from the shuddering in his chest, Tommy thinks he might be crying. He doesn’t try to pull away from Tommy forcing him to look toward him.

“You can let go, Wil. He’s gotta type fast before he bleeds out,” Tommy steps back, satisfied.

Wilbur leaves him without urgency, even as the blood spreads. He’s already covered in it. Dream’s hand trembles as he reaches for his comm, and Tommy watches with vicious satisfaction as he finally forces Dream to bend to his will. Dream holds the comm tightly, staring at it, and Tommy feels a nagging doubt.

“Dream, Dream wait—” he takes one step forward but by then it’s too late. Dream smashes the comm against the stone. The casing cracks, and he smashes it again, slamming it into the ground over and over until the keys break apart and the redstone wiring is destroyed by the water. “*Dream!*” Tommy stumbles forward, tackling Dream to the ground, wrenching the comm from his hands, but it doesn’t matter. The stupid thing is useless now.

Dream stops fighting, he lays flat on his back, waiting, almost blissfully, for the bloodloss to take him. Tommy staggers back, panic tight in his chest, tossing the comm aside. He wipes blood from his face and sniffs, eyes watering. Maybe he’d done too much too fast, maybe they should’ve taken the comm from him until he broke down and said he would use it, but none of that matters now. It’s too late for what they should’ve done. So Tommy raises the axe again.

“You... you said you wouldn’t do it for fun,” Dream says weakly. “*You said you wouldn’t do it for fun-!*” He screams and tries to crawl away, but it’s too late. One more swing, and Dream’s left leg is separated from his body.

“That wasn’t *fun*, Dream,” Tommy snarls, trembling with rage as well as grief, Dream might not even hear him over his own screaming, “that was a fucking *punishment*. *You* of all people should know the difference!”

Tommy pulls back, leaving Dream to die, looking at Wilbur, shaking. “What... what do we do now?”

Wilbur shrugs helplessly, staring at his brother, as if trying to decide if he looks different now, the bloody axe still hanging at his side. He wonders if he might look different now too. “I dunno.”

Tommy looks back at Dream. He doesn’t know what else to do. Dream bleeds out from his leg in minutes. Tommy watches him die. Wilbur is more distracted by the severed limb. He knows it’s no different to the gore he himself had conjured, but it feels different when the shape of it remains so distinctly human. Tommy finally looks back toward Wilbur, something loud and defensive behind his eyes, as if daring Wilbur to scold him for his brutality. It is only when Wilbur looks back, without horror or scolding and instead this awful pity, or not pity, worse, *understanding*, that Tommy wilts.

“I... I wasn’t this angry before,” Tommy says, too quiet, too hurt. “I never used to...” he trails off. He doesn’t know what he’s trying to protect himself from. He’s tired.

“I know, Tommy.” It’s all Wilbur can think to say. “It’s not just you. I... I don’t know what’s happened to us, but, well... it’s not like he didn’t deserve it, right?” He tries feebly.

Tommy smiles shakily, eyes watering. “That’s not the fucking point. I... I never used to be this angry. I shouldn’t... I shouldn’t have *done that*,” he gestures back to the corpse.

“That’s... that’s not supposed to be in me. I’m wrong, Wil. I’m all wrong and— and *fucked up* inside and that’s *his fault*.”

Wilbur doesn’t know what to say. He’d been committing himself to not judging Tommy, to letting whatever he did go as Tommy had for him, so to have Tommy rebuke that very

thought, Wilbur doesn't know where that leaves him. "I'm sorry," is what Wilbur says instead.

Tommy scrunches up his nose in disgust. "*Sorry?*" He shakes his head. "I don't want you to be *sorry*."

Wilbur smiles, almost amused. "Sorry," he says again.

Tommy looks at him with narrowed eyes, and then he laughs. A low, rough chuckle that Wilbur can't help but join. Tommy wonders how they're going to wash this much blood off in a sink.

It's strange to try to recover still within the walls of their personal hell, but it seems like the only thing left for them to do. Dream remains dead and locked away. Neither of them are especially bothered by that, and their hell becomes something almost survivable. They clean the most grotesque gore from the dome, tossing it out into the water where some ocean life will dispose of it for them. It takes longer than it should have for them to drag their two beds into the library due to the mining fatigue. They take the beds there not because there's particularly happy memories associated with the room where Tommy got an iron band welded to his skin, but simply because it's the driest room due to all the books. It takes not too much longer after that for them to break the glowstone in that room and replace it with a lantern. They're both sick of sleeping in a brightly lit room. There's *also* a jukebox in the library. Tommy wants to get a disc from Dream but the thought of Dream returning to smash it on the ground just to keep it from him is more painful than not being able to listen to anything right now.

Neither of them say it aloud, but they both know it. They've given up. This is how they're going to live indefinitely. Until Tubbo saves them. Tommy still thinks he will. It's *Tubbo*. Eventually he has to. Tommy can't help but wonder if Tubbo obeyed his one day a week request. He sort of wishes he didn't, but it feels selfish.

For a few days, they try mining. They start digging into the side of the corridor near the dark cell, because this seemed further back into the stone. Tommy hoped maybe they were dug underneath a landmass of some sort. They dig upwards at a sharp angle, steep steps with desperate hopes to reach the surface sooner rather than later. They do it in shifts, both of them weak, Wilbur especially, so Tommy does most of the heavy lifting. He'll mine for an hour, Wilbur will take over for a half hour, Tommy will be back at it again for an hour. They at one point start to worry that the pickaxe might break, but if they have to swim out and kill a few glow squids to keep it working, so be it.

That is, until it's been almost a week—or what they *think* is a week, because again, no clocks down here—and they've covered eleven blocks of height, with likely hundreds more to go and every chance they'll just hit water again, they stop. They could spend the next decade mining up into nothing. Maybe they'll try again eventually, once they get their strength back. It's not like they have anything better to do, but not yet.

Once they try swimming. Not far, certainly not far enough to risk dying out there alone, but just to see if maybe Dream had been lying and the surface was really just around the corner. It wasn't. Tommy almost liked that part. Once he got past the salt burning his eyes and the

old fear of drowning, he liked being around the glow squids. He has to come back down for air far too soon, though. Nothing comes of it. Nothing *ever* comes of any of it. They are well and truly stuck.

So they do as much living as they can.

Tommy likes to garden. Wilbur has dared to peruse the library and found a few texts of interest. He ignores the science and more cult-y books, but he can't pretend he doesn't find some of the philosophy morbidly fascinating. He doesn't share his findings with Tommy, not that Tommy minds. They try and get stronger. Food helps, but they try to exercise too. The dome is big enough they can move around and eventually Tommy convinces Wilbur to spar.

At first it's scary, and then fun, and then scary again.

Somewhere in his wandering the base, Tommy finds a few sticks and bits of wood. Just enough to make some wooden swords so they can't actually hurt each other. Maybe it's in poor taste, for them to fight again. It certainly feels that way. Tommy takes a hesitant step forward, and Wilbur immediately flinches back. Tommy steps back too, an effort to reassure him, so Wilbur steps forward as if to say he's okay to continue, but all that does is make *Tommy* flinch instead.

"We're both in fucking shambles," Tommy says harshly. "I *want* to do this," he says it almost defiantly. "Do *you*?"

Wilbur had agreed initially because Tommy had wanted to, but even now, the thought of taking some control back, of violence being something the two of them can engage with *safely*, it feels worthwhile. Wilbur doesn't want to be scared anymore either. "Yeah. I want to do this."

Tommy nods grimly. "Right, then. Get ready to lose, bitch!" He goes in swinging, aiming not for Wilbur, but for the sword still loose in his hand, so Wilbur raises it to defend himself, and the two wooden blades hit each other with such a gentle clatter. It's easier. Their goal to disarm, not *beat* the other. And for a time, it's *good*. They take back some of that control. Despite Dream engineering them against each other, despite Wilbur having hurt Tommy and Tommy having hurt Wilbur, they just get to let go for a while.

That is, until Tommy slips. It only happens once, but once is enough. Their wooden swords are pressed together, and Tommy pushes him back hard enough he hits the ground. And he doesn't stop. Tommy, blood pounding in his ears, a panic and rage both foreign and familiar welling up inside of him unbidden, and he brings the wooden sword down on Wilbur, who with well-versed instinct raises his arm to defend himself, the wood not enough to break skin but certainly enough to bruise, just the one blow, and that's all it takes.

Tommy stops. He drops the sword, he stares at his brother curled on the ground, still expecting another blow, and he *hates* it. He'd almost forgotten. These past days, past *weeks*, he'd almost *settled*. He'd almost forgotten what Dream made of him, until he found an awful way to remind himself.

Wilbur looks taken aback, he looks *scared*, even after Tommy drops the sword, but he seems to get his bearings before Tommy does.

“I-I’m alright,” Wilbur says hoarsely. His arm stings. Tommy sits back on top of a chest. He nods, expression heavy with horror, but he doesn’t say a word. Wilbur knows what he’s thinking.

I never used to be this angry.

“Tommy?” Wilbur says cautiously.

“I don’t wanna do this anymore,” Tommy murmurs.

“That’s... that’s alright. We don’t have to. Really, I don’t care. We could... we could try mining again? That’ll help us, y’know, build up some muscle? Probably more than the sparring, if I’m honest. We could also run laps around the dome? Or something?”

Tommy shakes his head. He isn’t looking at Wilbur. “Not... not that. I don’t want to *do this* anymore.”

Wilbur understands. He can’t pretend it hasn’t been a thought kept ill buried in his own mind as well. This is no way to live. But they both know death is no alternative. They’re just *stuck*. Wilbur stands and goes to sit beside him.

“Yeah, me too,” Wilbur says wearily.

Silence. There’s nothing more to be said.

Tommy stands. “I... I think I wanna farm some potatoes right now,” he says with the intonation of a child holding back tears.

“Yeah?” Wilbur replies as any good big brother should. “Let’s go do that, then.”

And they do. And the days continue to pass.

Tubbo knows it isn’t really going to help him save them, but the day those messages appeared on his comm, he remembered how to hope again.

Dream was slain by <player>

“He... he doesn’t have his comm. Tommy *and* Wilbur don’t have their comms, so...” Tubbo stares at the message, heart racing.

Dream was slain by <player>

“Dream was on his last life,” the moment Tubbo says it, it appears again.

Dream was slain by <player>

A few minutes of pause.

Dream was slain by <player>

And Tubbo laughs. “That’s them! They’re giving him hell.”

“And... his name isn’t showing up—”

“Because he doesn’t have his comm! Exactly.” Tubbo doesn’t know what to do with this desperate, excited energy within him. He knows there’s nothing he can do to help them right now, but he still feels like he should be doing *something*.

So he watches the water, like some part of him thinks Tommy will emerge any moment. The waves remain calm and undisturbed.

Ranboo wants to run with it too, he wants to *find* something, and he knows Tubbo won’t have an answer, but in that excitement, the question slips out before he can stop himself. “What do we do?”

Tubbo laughs, somehow helpless and panicked and desperately joyful. “No clue!” Tubbo continues to watch the water, some part of him foolishly, beautifully convinced any moment now, Tommy will appear in the waves.

He holds onto that for days. Then over a week. But *nothing* happens. Until the death notifications return.

Dream was slain by <player> using [tubbo i know u cant find us but we r here we r wai]

The strange euphoria the sight brings, Tubbo could almost cry. He’s hearing from Tommy. In the strangest, most morbid way possible. But it’s the first words he’s gotten from his best friend in ten months.

“Ranboo! Ranboo come look!” Tubbo runs toward his husband, who had been running to him in turn.

“It’s Tommy!” Ranboo replies delightedly.

“It’s *Tommy!*” Tubbo repeats it with the same awed joy.

It brings about fanfare from the server as a whole. They immediately cast anchor and light the portal. There’s a flurry of excitement, however useless it might be, enough that Niki, Jack, Quackity, Eret, Sam, and Ponk all end up piled aboard the ship. Techno and Sapnap are too far out to return that quickly, but there’s been a wave of messages too.

“Tommy is a fucking genius!” Tubbo will tell anyone who will listen. “Of course he figured out a way to talk!”

The second message comes through, and it’s like everyone on the server has been holding their breath, a round of cheers and excited chatter as another death is announced.

Dream was slain by <player> using [ran out of space we kno ur coming nd we r ok 4 now]

Michael is incredibly confused by all the excitement, but he seems to be having fun. Tubbo is well aware that the toddler cannot read, but he can't help but scoop the boy up and show him his comm. "That's him! That's your Uncle Tommy!"

"Careful, you're gonna make him think the comm is Tommy," Ranboo had teased him lightly.

"Hush! Our lad is way smarter than that, he's got that object permanence shit *down*," Tubbo shot back lightly. He hasn't been this joyful in so long.

Dream was slain by <player> using [we r still deep underwater if i can figure out whr]

Dream was slain by <player> using [where i will tell u asap but idk how yet]

Even if these messages don't get him any closer to finding them, it still feels like hope.

Dream was slain by <player> using [u know what we kno so hope 2 see u soon love u man]

Dream was slain by <player> using [i hope u did what i askd. I hope ur living too]

Phil had already joined in the reverie, but he looks far too giddy for an ancient immortal when Wilbur's name finally appears.

Dream was slain by <player> using [wil says hi and hes sorry he left things so rough]

"He's— He's apologizing!" Phil laughs. "Of fucking course Wil is using his message to *apologize*, he's such a sap!"

Dream was slain by <player> using [Wil says hed do it different if he could go back]

They wait for more, but they stop there. Hours pass, and the joy wanes into mere anticipation.

Then days, and those with other lives to live go home.

And Tubbo remains.

They wait for days into weeks, and there is nothing. Maybe there's a finite amount of revive books, maybe they can't waste them unless it's important. Tubbo fears it's something worse, that maybe they *can't* send a message anymore.

No one knows what happened to Ghostbur. He came and went all the time, and then one day he stopped coming back. Phil hadn't known what to make of it, but nonetheless, Ghostbur is gone. He's no longer an option. If using a death notification is no longer an option either, Tubbo doesn't know what he's waiting for. Tommy cannot give him the coordinates, so all he can do is what he's been doing. *i hope u did what i askd. I hope ur living too*

Tubbo doesn't feel guilty for his constant searching, because Tubbo thinks Tommy has probably underestimated his multitasking skills. Every day, he looks for Tommy. But he's

also living too. Because he's only living as he can, without Tommy there, it's not enough. He hopes Tommy would be proud of him, though. He's still trying to live.

And I'm coming for you, Tommy. You couldn't get away from me if you tried. I'm clingy like that, remember?

Tommy doesn't know how it took him so long to think of it.

It doesn't spawn from pleasant thoughts, first from the sight of his own missing finger, and then a bitter spiral of Wilbur's losses, and then Tommy realizes.

"Holy fuck," Tommy scrambles to his feet, dusting off dirt from beside one of the planter beds and he runs toward the dome. That's where Wil spends most of his time, when not reading or scrawling something in one of his blank journals, he's there if only to watch the glow squids. "Wil!" Tommy skids into the room, Wilbur quick to shield his book from the spray of water.

"Tommy?!" Wilbur's first impulse is panic. "What is it?! You alright?!"

"You've gotta help me try something!" He says excitedly before taking off back into the tunnel. "You gotta help me kill myself!"

"You fucking wot?!" Wilbur shouts after him.

"I can..." Tommy calls back, breathless, as he grabs one of the revive books. "I can try to bring myself back!" He turns around and almost smacks right into Wilbur who had followed. "Here! In case it doesn't work, you'll need this."

Wilbur scrambles to catch it as he tosses it at him.

Tommy grabs another copy. "And we've gotta bring back Dream."

"Why the fuck do we need him for?!"

"We don't *need him*, just need him *alive* so he can't give me any shit in Limbo!" Tommy proceeds toward the cell where Dream's body has been left to decay.

"Slow down!" Wilbur struggles to keep pace. "Still caught up on the *helping you die* part!"

"Gotta die somehow, brother dearest!" Tommy says brightly. He's almost agitated with hope. He thought they'd run out of chances, and here is one Tommy had coveted so carefully and kept from Dream's grubby hands.

"What's the *point*?!" Wilbur almost crashes into him when he stops.

Tommy is breathless and elated. "Because, Wil. If I can do this, I can make it to the surface."

Dawning realization. "You... you drown halfway up," Wilbur says weakly.

“And I bring myself back and keep going!”

“Holy *shit*.”

They left Dream’s corpse in the room with the sea lantern and the chains hanging from the ceiling, and despite being sealed so far underground, after so much time, it doesn’t smell pleasant. Wilbur follows him into the room with only a shred of hesitation.

Tommy is quick to burn the next revive book. With conscious effort, he does not command his resurrection with *wake up*. This task is merely to get them out of there. Tommy is not the kind of person to revel in harm. He doesn’t want to be. Right now, he just wants to hope again.

Dream returns, and as Tommy himself could remember doing all those resurrections ago when he’d lost his finger, Dream looks down at his leg.

“I-If you put it back, if you open up the wound, put it back, and kill me, maybe it’ll reattach—”

“Fucking disgusting, man,” Tommy shudders. “Why the fuck would we do that? Besides, it’s gone. It’s chum now.”

Dream falls silent, pain as much as fury radiating from his gaze. Dream sighs. “Now what, boys? *Now* is the plan to just hurt me for fun?”

Boys. He keeps calling them that. Even now, Dream remains demeaning and patronizing.

“Nah, I just don’t want to see your ugly fuckin’ mug while I’m dead,” Tommy says, patting Dream’s head. “Help me gag him, will you, Wil? I don’t give a shit what he’s got to say.”

“I’d *love* to,” Wilbur holds Dream steady while Tommy ties a rag around his mouth.

“No, what’re you fucking talking about?!” Dream struggles furiously. “I’ve been dead for so fucking long! You just *left me there?! How—*” The man is silenced.

Tommy continues, giddily, smug. “See, Dream, I’m gonna be dead for a little bit while I try to bring myself back!”

Dream’s eyes widen and he struggles against his ropes, clearly throwing a tantrum.

Tommy cackles. “Yeah! Yeah, I fucking *lied*, bitch!”

Dream doesn’t get to witness this. So they leave him there, alive and therefore unable to harm Tommy in Limbo, but also furious and pathetic. Perfect.

There remains the matter of dying.

Tommy returns to the dome. “I’d... I’d have you just do it real quick with a pickaxe or something, but... d’you think you could stomach that, Wil?” Tommy looks at him doubtfully.

Wilbur wants to protest, to say he could do it. He can't. "Probably not? I mean, you've killed *me* before, when I asked, so, I dunno, if we could... if we could just do that again?"

"I've got to be the one to die. You know that, Wil," Tommy has to coach his brother through aiding his suicide. "I'm the one who's got it memorized."

"I— I know," Wilbur tries to sound unbothered. "I... I dunno how I'm gonna kill you, though."

"You don't really even *have* to, Wil. You just... I'd like the help. And honestly, the company, really," Tommy shrugs. He's less energetic now, but still so confident, like he's already convinced himself this will work.

"Well, what did *you* have in mind, then?" Wilbur frowns.

"Drowning."

"*Drowning?* That's— That's not exactly fast *or* painless."

Tommy is smiling. "Yeah, but I sure am good at it, though!"

Wilbur hesitates. "Are you... are you *sure* about this? We could... we could try and rig something up with the crossbow? So, you could pull the trigger?"

Tommy shakes his head. "No. I... I want it to be this way, Wil."

Wilbur is at a loss. "*Why?*"

Tommy looks almost sheepish now. "Look, don't... don't hold it against me, alright? It'll... it'll sorta be like baptism. Like at Church Prime."

Wilbur's incredulity softens into something more understanding. "I'm not too keen on religion myself."

"Ah, well," Tommy shrugs, smiling. This is different. It's not Dream's godhood, these gods belonged to *Tommy*. He wants that back. "I say it is. For my sake."

"Sure, Tommy," Wilbur will do it. If Tommy asks, he'll treat this fratricide as something holy.

The deepest part of the water in the dome is where the sea lanterns lie between slabs. There, the water is a full block deep.

"You... you wanna do this *now*?" Wilbur hesitates still.

"Yeah! I... I can't *not* know. Alright? If I don't try *now*, I'm gonna lose my fucking mind," Tommy settles down in the water, looking up at Wilbur expectantly.

"How... how long should I give you?" Wilbur asks. He almost sounds sad, like a child left behind.

“Give me... give me ten minutes. That should be enough time for me to write and burn a book,” Tommy says. “It’s ten minutes, Wil. And if I’m not back after that, you bring me back, alright? You got your matches?”

“Yeah, yeah I do,” Wilbur fumbles for the matchbook, needing to reassure himself that they were still there.

“I just need you to hold me, okay?” Tommy says it so gently, even as it’s half a lie. He needs Wilbur to hold him down, below the water.

“Okay. Okay, I can... I can do that,” Wilbur nods. He hesitates. “Even in the *salt water*?” Wilbur tries weakly.

Tommy nods. “It was one of my firsts. Did you know that? One of my earliest deaths, I’d... I’d swim out, and I’d drown. Didn’t know it was drowning then, but it was.” It feels like decades ago. “I think even then I was swimming toward home.” He looks up at his brother, patting the water beside him. “Come sit!”

Wilbur, with far less enthusiasm, kneels beside his brother. It *is* like a baptism. Wilbur doesn’t consider himself to be very holy, but to him, Tommy is. The sea lantern below him makes Tommy look radiant.

“You ready, Wil?” Tommy clasps onto his brother’s hand, laying back, so that his hand locked with Wilbur’s is the only thing keeping him above the water, like Wilbur is about to pull him to his feet instead of push him below. He trusts him.

Tommy hasn’t prayed in a long time. He doesn’t know who or what he’s praying to, but maybe it’s better that way. He cannot trust any God he’s ever known, so maybe he’ll trust one he doesn’t know instead. He needs this to work. “See you soon.”

Wilbur smiles, and the way Tommy looks up at him almost makes him feel less afraid. “See you soon.”

Then Tommy is under the water, and it doesn’t hurt. Wilbur never lets go of his hand.

Chapter End Notes

I said a sad ending, but this is hopefully open-ended enough for you all to live with!

Regardless, if you've finished this fic, first off, thank you! Secondly. [Go here! Right now, go here!!! This is where this fic splits off from TDDD, go here for the canon ending of this fic!](#)

Wake Up. is just one of Tommy’s nightmares <3

[\(and if you already have read TDDD but would just like some comfort, go reread the last chapter!\).](#)

Thank you all for coming on this journey with me, I know it wasn't easy lol. I am still writing dsmp fics! I have [a huge mafia au](#) going on right now that I'm quite proud of and I am planning on writing more crimeboys centric works in the future, so you can always subscribe to me on here to know when I post more fics!

You can also [follow me on tumblr](#). I also have a discord server for my fics, so if you wanna chat with some like-minded people, [please join us!](#)

This fic has been such a huge part of my life and I'm sad to see it go. Thank you all for sticking around, for being so kind and supportive, and for reading this fic despite The Horrors. I'll miss sharing in the excitement with you all. I hope the ending lived up to your expectations! Remember, the darkness you fight is within you, and the light you seek is also within you. Take care of each other. <3

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!